

Multicultural Issues and Solutions in International Task Forces

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Team 1

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Introduction

International task forces are becoming increasingly common in the professional, government and academic communities to solve the tough problems facing business and society. It's possible that we'll all participate in an international task force at some point in our careers.

The dictionary definition of task force is a good starting point for understanding the concept:

***TASK FORCE (NOUN)** a group or committee, usually of experts or specialists, formed for analyzing, investigating, or solving a specific problem. ("Definition task force - noun," 2011).*

For this paper we are defining an international task force as a group of experts brought together from throughout the world to solve a specific problem. Some of its key attributes are the members are from many different companies, the team exists for a limited time to solve a problem and there is no formal leader of the team; the team is self organizing and decides on its own leadership and processes. Examples of international task forces are the IEEE committee that defined the 802.11n Wi-Fi standard (technical), the Doha round of GATT that refined free trade rules (government) and the International Obesity Task Force trying to reduce worldwide obesity (societal).

The benefits of these task forces are obvious -they bring together the top experts from throughout the world to focus on solving a problem. This diverse set of professional, educational and cultural backgrounds brings multiple points of view together to solve the problem. In today's globally interconnected world with inexpensive international travel and nearly free global communications it's cost effective to use the best people available to solve a problem.

But the problems of these teams are equally obvious – people from many different backgrounds with limited experience working together trying to operate effectively as a team while separated by time, distance, language and culture. These differences impact the team's ability to communicate, build trust, solve problems and work effectively as a team. Teams need to address these challenges or be at higher risk of failure (Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004)

This paper examines the existing literature to provide an overview of the impact of these cultural and other effects on teams, both positive and negative, and to highlight some of the solutions applicable to task forces.

Background Research

There is little existing research specific to international task forces but relevant material was found in three main areas: cultural issues in teams, overseas software development (offshoring) and virtual teams. Table 1 summarizes the difference in team types.

Team Type	Duration	Locations	Companies
International Task Force	Short	Many	Many
Team Cultural Research	Short / Long	1	1
Offshoring	Long	2	1 – 2
Virtual Team	Long	Many	1

Table 1 Types of Teams

There has been extensive research done on the impact of cultural diversity on teams. The work has ranged from academic papers that study the impact of cultural differences on team productivity (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008) to articles giving recommendations on how to deal with cultural issues. (Brett, Behfar, & Kern, 2006). From this work many cultural issues and solutions can that applied to task forces.

The large amount of software development being moved to foreign countries has resulted in extensive research on offshoring. It focus on the how distance, different time zone, cultural differences and working with external organizations impact teams. Some of the results is not relevant to task forces due to their shorter lifetime and participants coming from many companies and countries but there are observations and recommendations that can be applied to international task forces. The papers by (Carmel & Agarwal, 2002), (Krishna, Sahay, & Walsham, 2004) and (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008) provide some valuable suggestions relevant to our topic.

A task force can be considered a subset of a virtual team. Virtual teams are usually long term teams working within a single company, have a formal leader and report to company management. As with the work on offshoring although there are differences between virtual teams and international task forces some of the findings can be applied. Papers such as (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000) and (Higgs, 1996) cover virtual teams.

Definitions

In the cultural literature there are a number of measures of cultural difference that are important to team dynamics. One that is important to team conflict is **Power Distance**.

- **Power Distance** – “the degree to which members of a culture expect power to be distributed unequally”, (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008) and how authority and status are distributed within a culture (Cseh, 2003). Cultures such as the United States and Denmark that have low power distance are more egalitarian, employees seek involvement and prefer participatory decision making. Cultures with high power distance, such as Russia, Malaysia and Thailand tend to distinguish more between people with power and those with little. People accept that they will be directed what to do by the organization. In teams this impacts the appropriateness of communication, different management styles, and self management of teams.

Problems and Advantages of Cultural Differences

The diverse backgrounds of international task force members are both an advantage and disadvantage. The advantages of utilizing the best people from around the world is obvious but there other advantages to having a highly diverse mix of people. The problems with team's operating effectively given these very different backgrounds and the nature of task forces are equally obvious.

Negatives

Having many people from different countries work together is a great idea since they generate many creative ideas and use their different skills to enhance team performance but also has several negative issues such as interpersonal conflict, communication difficulties and language differences that can interfere with the team working effectively.

Communication

Communication is a key factor for team success. It's a challenge for an international task force to communicate effectively and achieve their goals. Many intercultural teams struggle with communication difficulties.

How different cultural backgrounds negatively impact communication is a key problem for international task forces. One aspect is direct versus indirect communication (Brett, et al., 2006). Western cultures use direct communication whereas Eastern cultures do not. Easterners hesitate to express their ideas so it is hard for Westerners to understand them. In contrast, Easterners think harmony is the most important thing for them. They sometimes will agree on something that they do not want to maintain the relationship secured. Both of these characteristics cause imperfect communication and reducing information sharing.

Verbal and nonverbal miscommunication also initiates problems (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008). In verbal miscommunication, Easterners like to know each other first to develop mutual trust while Westerners focus merely on getting their jobs done. With the difference in communication, each may get confused about what they are supposed to do leading to misunderstandings and lower team performance.

An example of nonverbal differences in communication is Easterners smiling to make another person comfortable, but Westerners interpret it differently and viewing it as trying to embarrass them. When this kind of situation happens over and over, people can become uncomfortable interacting with each other lead to long-term problems in team communication.

The greater the diversity in teams, (cultural, national, and educational) and the less experience that team members have working together the greater the amount of communication required for team members to work effectively (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). The lack of shared background means that all communication needs to be explicit and unambiguous which requires longer messages and more communication. As the team gains experience working together the amount of communication required decrease as the team members gain a shared understanding of the project.

Language

Language is a big obstacle for intercultural teams to achieve their goals. Frustration may occur during conversation because of accent, lack of fluency, or problems with translation or usage. An interesting example is with a US-Japan team where English was the language used in the team (Brett, et al., 2006). When Japanese members raised ideas, an American teammate ignored them and did not respect them. He thought Japanese were not smart judging by their inability to speak English fluently. This type of ignorance will impede team performance since excellent ideas will be ignored.

Problems with language were one of the main reasons why the Iridium project, one of the largest telecommunications projects, failed (Krishna, et al., 2004). Communication was difficult since five different languages were spoken. Translators were the only choice and when the translators did not show up, it was impossible for a meeting to proceed.

Two negative impacts of language diversity are: the visible causes of difficulties which is a lack of language competence, and the invisible causes of difficulties which is a lack of communication competence (Henderson, 2005). Due to a lack of language competence, conversation among team members may not be understandable because of a number of factors: unfamiliar vocabularies, speed of speech, strong accent, and too many mistakes in the dialogue. The recipients may incorrectly understand the message or misinterpret it. So the team members could end up not sharing the same ideas.

Conflict

Any international task force will encounter problems. When a diverse group of people are assembled as team, there are likely to be conflicts due to their differences. An illustrative example is the conflict between employees from the United States and India on a project (Brett, et al., 2006). The team could not agree a product launch date. The American team members forecasted that the product should be distributed in two to three weeks while the Indians thought it would longer. Such a conflict might cause personal frustration and lower the team's effectiveness.

Criticism

It is generally acceptable for Americans and Europeans to directly criticize when they think that something is wrong. In contrast, for Asians, it is difficult or impossible to criticize people. In fact, advising them what to do in a polite way is a good way to convey criticism. This attitude towards criticism can be explained by difference in culture and power distance (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008). Since Asian people are more sensitive towards criticism than American or European people it can have a negative impact on intercultural teams. Greater power distance differences within the team also have a negative impact on both the creativity and innovativeness of a team (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008).

Trust

For team members to work effectively they need to trust each other. It's difficult to build trust in task forces because of the lack of prior experience with other team members and the limited amount of face to face communication (McDonough, Kahn, & Barczak, 2001). In electronic communication it's difficult for people to gauge the trustworthiness of other people. The shorter duration of task forces means that there is only limited time to build trust.

Positives

An intercultural team causes problems but can also be a good. Once the team has overcome the problems, it can utilize the creativity, innovation, and knowledge sharing by people on the team to improve its effectiveness.

Creativity and Innovation

Creativity and innovation are the essential for teams to survive in today's competitive environment. Diverse team members increase team creativity which can be beneficial when competing in global markets. The national background information or knowledge of diverse team members is a main factor that enhances teams' creativity and innovation (Krishna, et al., 2004). There are two positive factors: diversity in cognitive styles and motivational factors which influence creativity and innovation.

Other work has reached a similar conclusion (Matveev & Nelson, 2004). It is beneficial for teams to have people from different countries since each can contribute using a variety of ideas and skills. They can share them to generate higher quality results than mono-cultural teams.

Greater diversity within teams positively impacts individual motivation and group cohesion leading to improved creativity and innovation (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008).

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge is essential for every team. Knowledge from team members with the same backgrounds might be too limited. Teams with people from diverse countries can draw upon a great pool of shared knowledge. An example of an international successful project was a Y2K project (R. B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2008). Several intercultural teams worked to update computer systems for the millennium date change. The teams helped each other by sharing information on their projects, problems, progresses, and successes while improved the other team's success.

Solutions

As we have seen in the previous section cultural differences can have a negative impact on a team's efficiency. For international task forces, there are many studies that provide solutions to deal with cultural problems such as establishing clear roles and operating mechanisms, using adaptation, choosing a common language, using acceptance of culture diversity, and learning about cultural traits of team members.

Establish Clear Roles and Operating Mechanisms (Conflict)

As noted earlier, differences in culture may result in team conflict. One method of dealing with this is to define a clear team structure, roles and team operating mechanisms (Winkler, Dibbern, & Heinzl, 2008), (Kaiser, Tullar, & McKowen, 2000). Establishing agreed upon team processes and procedures will clarify what needs to be accomplished and how to work with other team members. This will enhance participation and engagement in teams and improve team efficiency.

This development of shared mental models and language for communication about the project improves team processes (Suchan & Hayzak, 2002).

Setting the team's strategy and schedule for task completion with ground rules for using electronic media will contribute to the team's performance. It is also important to set intermediate and final goals and ensure they are thoroughly understood by the entire team (Kaiser, et al., 2000).

Using Adaptation (Culture)

Often international task forces have leaders from one culture and team members from different cultures. Conflict may arise from the team leader suggesting one method and members from other cultures preferring a different approach. When possible team members should be aware of and adapt to the leader's culture and methods of doing things (Ricarda B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2010), (Winkler, et al., 2008). In some cases, team members not only learn and adapt to team leaders but they might have to learn and adapt to other members as well in order to reduce conflict when with others.

Choosing a Common Language (Language)

When international team members speak different languages, misunderstanding and communication mistakes may occur. One method of dealing with different language is to define a common language used for working and communication (Ricarda B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2010). For example, when team members speak different languages such as Indian, English, Korean, and Japanese they might choose English as a common language to work together. They don't need to speak the language all the time and may use their native language to check their understanding as an example.

Using Acceptance of Culture Diversity (Criticism)

Culturally diverse teams can have trouble dealing with criticism that sometimes arises from differences in power distance. Learning about and accepting diversity of cultures can be a solution to the problem (Ricarda B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2010). When team members experience the same problems or conflict over time, they start to learn and accept the conflict and the diversity of cultures. Over time they develop a common team culture and adapt to their teammate's behaviors.

Learning About Cultural Traits of Team Members (Conflict, Criticism)

Each team members' culture influences their personality leading to different behavioral norms. This might cause problems and affect team performance. Learning about and understanding the cultural differences provides insight into other factors such as power distance and reduces conflict and increases trust (Ricarda B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2010).

Structural Intervention (Conflict)

An organizational solution is structural intervention – which is restructuring the team to reduce interpersonal conflict, language tension or a source of conflict. (Ricarda B. Bouncken & Winkler, 2010). The team can be divided into sub-teams of mixed cultures and expertise working on different parts of the project. The sub-team members are selected by the leader to minimize issues and balance participation so no one dominates the whole group.

Using the Silent Language (Conflict, Communication)

Realizing that there are differences in culture and understanding how these impact task force members' ideas on project management will improve the team's efficiency. Team members need to understand

both how the cultural variables of environment, time orientation, nature of people, activity orientation, focus on responsibility, and orientation to space impact themselves and other members (Milosevic, 1999). Each of these factors impact members' view towards different aspects of project processes such as schedule, cost, and quality. Understanding these differences will improve the team's ability to communicate and reduce conflict. It will also enhance the efficiency of using adaptation.

Face To Face Meetings (Trust)

Effective global task forces need to engage in regular face to face meetings. Using face to face meetings at the start of a project is critical to initial project planning and the development of a successful team. (DeMeyer, 1991). Electronic communication can be used as a supplement for scheduling, sharing results and materials but the actual initial planning needs to be done in face to face meetings. Part of these initial meetings should focus on relationship building because these early experiences strengthen the socioemotional development of the team and foster later success by improving performance and enhancing learning.

These Initial face to face meetings are also important to building the team's social bonds which improves trust, respect and the effectiveness of later electronic communications (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000), (Suchan & Hayzak, 2002). It's then important to have regularly scheduled face to face meetings to resolve complex issues and to maintain the social relationships. In addition there the need to be frequently scheduled electronic meetings to maintain a even pace of work.

Conclusion

Today, international task forces are becoming an increasingly common tool for bringing the best people together to solve problems. As with any team – task forces have positives and negatives. Although task forces have become more common – the published research has not kept pace. There are relevant findings from research in the team intercultural, offshoring and virtual teams research streams.

An international taskforce faces the normal challenges of a team plus those of distance, time, members from different cultures, different countries and different companies. This results in problems with communication, language, and dealing with conflict and criticism. An international taskforce has the traditional advantages of teams plus improved knowledge sharing and innovation.

The literature provides many general solutions, some of which are applicable to international task forces. The team can establish clear roles, use adaptation, structural intervention and learning about the cultural traits of time members to minimize the potential problems.

It is clear that international task forces are a useful tool for solving problems and their effectiveness can be improved by applying the right remedies.

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