

## Introduction

The world is becoming increasingly interconnected: technology has allowed us to travel and talk to each other across distances; there are more of us with higher expectations; and industrialised nations have saturated their own markets. Along with the commercial activity, an appreciation of the interconnectedness of our environment has been forced upon us by pollution, disease and natural and industrial disasters. The result is that increasingly we have to work with people from other nations to solve complex international problems and to take advantage of opportunities often far away from home. As Michael Schrage reminds us:

*'Individual genius may spot fertile ground, but it takes a collaborative community to cultivate and harvest it.'*

International teams are increasingly the mechanism used to harness the necessary international collaboration. The goals of such teams are usually broad and intended to have a much greater impact than teams of one nationality based in one place. Often whole companies depend on the quality of their output. The stakes are high. Yet experience tells us that working with people different from ourselves does not come naturally to most. The potential for difficult communication and misunderstandings and worse, open displays of prejudice and ignorance, is very high. Effective collaboration in these teams needs to be actively worked for. This book shares the knowledge, tools and techniques that we have found helpful in establishing that collaboration.

### Main Themes

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International teams are different from 'other' teams because their participants hold passports from different nationalities. To greater and lesser degrees, this means that cultural differences will add another layer of complexity to the team's interaction. We have a particular view of cultural and individual differences. Writers on international teams have talked about transcending, resolving, fusing and integrating individual cultures to create a new or 'third'

team culture and a unified result. In our view, rising above or fusing differences is not only uninteresting, but can lead to instability and rigidity. If we are to maintain a dynamic kind of equilibrium that is adaptable to change, we need to passionately love our differences. To do so, we need to understand them in some depth.

A piece of brown cloth can be made from brown threads all dyed in the same brown dye. Alternatively, a piece of brown cloth can look the same shade of brown from four feet away, but on close inspection is made up of bright blue, red, yellow, green, purple, orange, black and white threads. Unlike the first, this second cloth can be unravelled when it has served its purpose and woven into any colour then needed. People need to remain bright in their own colours while weaving a common purpose and agreed way of interacting. That way they can best manage the creative tensions between global perspectives and local needs. People can also maintain their sense of self worth and create the need for others to learn and broaden their outlook. In other words, we need a way of interacting that adapts not too much and not too little, but creatively, 'just enough'.

Another theme that runs throughout this book is our conviction that cultural differences rarely, if ever, play out on a level field. Certainly the present reality in private business or international intergovernmental bodies is that one or two cultures will often have an upper hand, either because of numbers, power over resources, choices of language or preconceptions and stereotypes about others. We are convinced that whether these inequalities arise from the organisational context of the team, or from the individuals within the teams, they often have a far greater (negative) impact than cultural differences per se. A large part of the work we do with organisations and teams is to lessen the negative impact of power differences through paying attention to a team's processes. Over many years of working, we have become convinced that structuring a team's processes leads to greater participation, protection of minority views and a huge saving in time. For this reason we have developed a model\* that looks at what needs to be attended to at each stage of the team's life cycle and what interventions are appropriate for speeding things up and raising subliminal issues at each stage. The aim of the model is to make process management within international teams a concrete issue that has a large impact on performance outcome.

Finally, our approach is one of developing an organisational capability to use international teams to respond effectively across cultures and distances. The most practical approach we have found is to work with a whole team as a facilitator, passing on the skills that enable that team to manage its own processes. Team members can then become facilitators of future teams. We have called this a 'systemic' approach. The word systemic reflects the fact that a flow

\* See Chapter Four.

of learning is created that fans out from core catalytic points and embeds best practices into the very fibre of the organisation. We have also found that senior management, sponsors, and human resource specialists need just as much feedback and coaching on how their current systems, actions or inaction help or hinder teams as well as the flow of learning. No international team stands alone. A team is embedded in the organisational culture(s) and context(s) that it is created to serve. As such, most of the organisation will need to transform its mindset, practices and support mechanisms. In fact, unless organisations recognise the need for this systemic approach to working globally, they can invest significant time, money and energy in their international teams, without developing a sustainable global capability. As a consequence of this approach, this book is primarily focused on the needs of international team leaders and members who are usually the conduit between what is happening in the team and the rest of the organisation.

### **Information Sources**

The information in this book is based on research and consulting experience. In the main piece of research, almost thirty international teams were videoed and surveyed in organisational settings in both Western Europe and South East Asia. The analysis focused on the amount each individual contributed within each team, and the predominant communication patterns that emerged with different team compositions and cultural contexts. It was a study that went fishing for an in-depth view of what was going on in these teams and that revealed the biases in favour of those who belonged to the same nationality as the main leadership group of the company. It also yielded rich stories that are shared in Chapter Three.

Some of the contextual material in Chapter One and Chapter Two draws on the interviews and unused survey data of over thirty transnational teams at the beginning of the nineties, while Chapter Ten draws on Seagram's internal review of its international re-engineering teams and other experiences of working with a range of international organisations. Much of the rest of the book is based on our joint experience of working to support the newly set up project teams in Wellcome from their beginnings and watching the transitions that took place after the merger into GlaxoWellcome. Extensive work with other companies has added more perspectives, short vignettes and different examples. As such, this book is not an in-depth, 'one coat fits all' recipe on the exact steps that each team must take. Rather, we aim to create some insights, to generate discussion and to provide frameworks and guidelines on what team leaders and other key parts of the organisation can usefully do to ensure that they are effective. We do share some of our favourite interventions in Chapter Five.

Rather than become exhaustive, the book builds on a basic understanding of what teams are and of cross-cultural communication, both of which have been

well covered elsewhere\*. This book looks at the impact of what happens when these two features combine and illustrates both what a team needs to do and the organisational context needed to make such teams effective. As such, parts of it needed to be in-depth and comprehensive. While some readers may find the wealth of information in Chapter Two too much to take in at one go, the bulleted summaries and interim learning points are designed to allow someone to start by taking in the main points and to return to the detail at a later date. One point needs clarification. Almost all this book will be very relevant for international teams working in the same place, but the main focus is on what we are calling 'dispersed' teams. These are teams that meet face to face on a regular basis every three or six months, but then work apart for most of the time. We touch briefly on what we call international 'virtual' teams in Chapter Six. These are, in our parlance, teams that *never* meet face to face. While again these teams need to understand much of what is said in this book and use similar best practices, they are bound by the limitations of communication technology, and have an additional and extensive set of difficulties to overcome that can only be dealt with briefly in this book. We have noticed that many articles and books in America published on virtual teams include teams that meet face to face. This is a looser definition than the one we apply here. So particularly many Americans will find that this book is focused on what they call virtual rather than dispersed teams.

## **The Structure of the Book**

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### **Section One: Successful Participation in International Teams**

#### **Chapter One: International Teams in the Current Scheme of Things**

This chapter takes a broad look at where international teams are in the current scheme of things. It defines an international team, looks at why international teams are now prevalent in organisations and what differentiates them from teams and globalisation in general. It then briefly explores the added complexities in these teams and shows why they create the need for much greater attention to the process. After giving a sample of what it is like to be in such teams, we focus on the needs of the team leaders.

#### **Chapter Two: Know Your Team**

This chapter is a resource chapter on cultural differences. International team leaders need to understand the many ways in which cultural differences can affect the interaction in their teams. Only then can they analyse, anticipate and establish best practices that ensure that these differences will work for the team,

\* See annotated bibliography for list of relevant books.

not against it. The chapter looks at five cultural and three organisational factors that can have a significant impact. In particular, the role of stereotypes, norms, language and communication patterns are discussed in full.

### **Chapter Three: The Impact of Inequalities**

Using the results and stories from in-depth video research, this chapter illustrates the difficulties caused by three types of inequality. Structural inequality occurs when one nationality outnumbers others. Linguistic inequality arises when team members have different levels of fluency in the working language and communication norms of that language. The third, and perhaps the most insidious, type of inequality is when some nationalities perceive themselves and are perceived as having more status, power, resources and influence regardless of the truth. The chapter ends with examples of when things go right.

### **Chapter Four: Implementing Best Practices**

The message from Chapter Three is that structuring a team's interaction can overcome many of the problems created by different communication styles, behavioural expectations and Chapter Four turns this into a simple four-phase model of a team's life cycle. It illustrates the useful actions that team leaders, sponsors, members can take before a team meets, when the team first meets, during the middle phase and when completing the work. Much emphasis is placed on adequate preparation before a team meets. This will be much more extensive than for other teams. The benefits of applying the model are cumulative. If the right actions are taken before a team meets, then the first meetings will be more fruitful and effective. If appropriate actions are taken in this initial phase, then many of the problems of working together and apart will be averted. If team leaders want a quick, 'what can I do immediately to make my team more effective' fix, then this is the chapter to read first.

### **Chapter Five: Facilitating International Teams and Key Interventions**

As the chapters so far have emphasised, the interaction in international teams needs to be consciously managed to be effective. If the team leader is involved in the content, then using a facilitator can be very helpful in passing on the skills that will enable the team members to manage their own interaction. This chapter outlines what a facilitator can do and when you may need one. It then gives the team leader a set of criteria that can distinguish what skills are essential and complementary to their own. It ends by sharing some of the interventions that facilitators can use at the different stages of the life cycle.

**Chapter Six: Leading in the Information Space: Teams and Technology**

The revolution in information technology has enabled teams to do much of their work from different locations. It is developing at a rapid pace. However, no amount of technology can create collaboration, if the underlying will and processes are not in place. This chapter starts by outlining how to make the best use of current technology and points the reader to information on future technology. It discusses how cultural differences may play out in the usage of technology, but emphasises the difficulties created by the lack of emotional and sensory data. These restrictions imply that at the moment, there are certain things that teams should use expensive 'face-to-face' time to achieve, and other things that can easily be achieved using existing information sharing technologies. This will create a rhythm and discipline for working together and apart. The chapter ends with a brief look at the special challenges faced by teams that never meet, teams we refer to as virtual rather than dispersed teams.

**Chapter Seven: The Role of International Team Leaders**

Having illustrated what effects cultural differences and inequalities can have in these teams and how team leaders and facilitators can best make them work for them, this section ends with a summary of the role of the team leader. Given all of the above, it is complex and demanding and is often beset with unrealistic expectations. The team leader needs to decide how to balance the need for both technical and leadership skills and then match the style of leadership to the strategic and operational needs of each stage of the team's development. After looking at the three main facets of the role: managing the boundaries; the interaction; and the task, the chapter ends with a reminder to keep the overall leadership style in tune with the cultural mix and context of the team.

**Section Two: What the Organisation Needs to Do to Support These Teams****Chapter Eight: Creating the Right Organisational Context**

This chapter urges senior management to take responsibility for creating an organisational context in which these teams can excel. To do this they need to involve key players from the start and, above all, communicate to each international team how its purpose fits into the company's overall strategy. Key managers then have to be proactive in removing out-dated or unintentional structural hurdles while being realistic about the speed at which these teams can reach optimal performance. The best way to achieve such aims is for top teams to learn by role-modelling and demonstrating that going global does not need to result in ignoring one's family and undermining one's health. Organisations also need to be committed to investing in the necessary resources to support these teams and above all realise that they are in for a

marathon with steep learning curves, not a sprint. We gratefully acknowledge Claudia Heimer's initial inputs into this chapter.

### **Chapter Nine: The Role of Human Resources (HR)**

This chapter explores the specific role that the Human Resources (HR) function has in supporting an organisational context in which international teams can be successful. This function needs to be a strategic partner in the creation of these teams, rather than being asked to sort out the operational difficulties created by a grand vision. HR need to develop a comprehensive strategy to support team leaders and members. Again, this usually entails walking the talk and reorganising to become high performing international teams themselves. The chapter ends with the various stages that one HR department went through in its steep learning curve to stay one ahead of the teams it was given to support.

### **Chapter Ten: Organisational Best Practices for International Teams**

The chapter begins by considering the organisational practices that focus on identifying, selecting and developing international team leaders. It finishes by looking at the difficulties and key factors in evaluating and rewarding the whole team. The section on evaluation argues a strong case for separating the evaluation of team performance from the effectiveness of the outcome. Both are important. Having watched many companies struggle with international team rewards, we highlight why this is such a tricky issue and why companies are currently best advised to remove obvious inequities. Team leaders and members need to be involved in deciding both evaluation and reward processes, but we suggest that they do not pay for months of expensive internal or external consultant's efforts to make a team's rewards and pay schemes exactly equal.

### **Chapter Eleven: International Teams in the Future Scheme of Things**

This final chapter summarises the key messages for international team leaders, members and senior managers. It then muses on the future. Rapid developments in technology will bring increasing freedom to participate from different places at different times. However, many of the underlying pitfalls and dynamics of working across cultures will remain unchanged. We are therefore of the opinion that even a small shift towards a revolution in human interaction and the way we view each other in the present and the future, will have a much more profound effect on human development. We hope that some of the best practices outlined in this book are small steps towards such a change.