Chapter Seven

The Role of International Team Leaders

The previous chapters of Section One have focused on the key issues facing international teams and are therefore valuable reading to anyone working with an international team irrespective of their individual role. This last chapter of the section focuses on one role explicitly, that of international team leader, and explores in detail the responsibilities of that role. Whilst primarily aimed at potential or actual international team leaders, the discussion will also be valuable for team sponsors and members so that they can see how their roles support and reinforce that of the international team leader.

The expectations individuals and organisations have of international team leaders are high. They are expected to:

- decide the nature of the team's task, terms of reference and devise a realistic workplan;
- navigate the organisational and political context in which their team operates;
- manage the interface of the team with the organisation;
- create a motivated and cohesive team across countries and time zones;
- ensure that the skills and resources required for the task are available and allocated effectively;
- balance conflicting interests and bridge cultural preferences in the team;
- lead with a style that takes account of their own preferences, strengths and limitations;
- deliver a result that satisfies the multiple stakeholder demands.

On top of this, they are usually also expected to be experts at what the team has to do, and be willing to live with a heavy travel schedule. If this reads like the job description of a superhuman being, it is. So, how do managers of international teams really cope? What do they really have to be good at? Unrealistic expectations derive largely from a lack of role clarity in many organisations around international team leaders. Previously suggested desirable competencies for international managers have ranged from 'marked telepathic and intuitive sensitivity', 'a helicopter view with a sense of reality', 'cognitive complexity', 'boundary spanning', 'geocentric', and 'creating a matrix in the

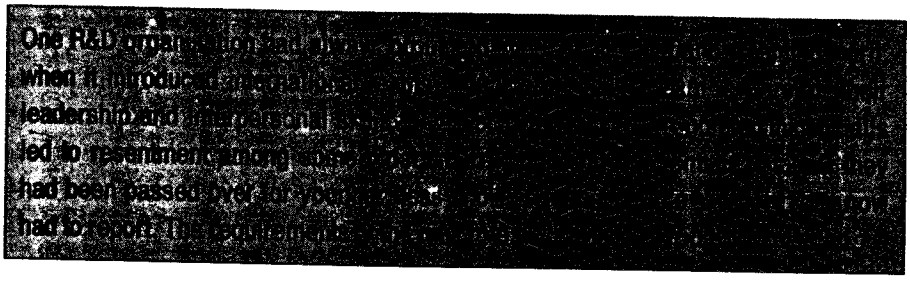
mind of managers'. It is not surprising that organisations and individuals can get confused.

Technical Knowledge or Leadership Skills?

One of the first issues to resolve is whether the international team leader needs in-depth technical knowledge of the subject or needs highly developed leadership skills. The fact is that for most technical experts, once an expert, always first an expert, and second a manager, even if they have been a director of an important international research organisation for over a decade. It is very rare to meet a brilliant scientist or technical expert who has either the desire or in-born skill to lead a complex team, let alone enjoy administrating as this quote from one team leader illustrates:

> *'There are so many reviews and committees – all I am doing is writing reports – when am I supposed to get on with the real work?'*

Yet the previous chapters illustrate that much of an international team leader's time will be taken managing external boundaries, co-ordinating the work flow and the people, and accessing necessary resources. Leader or expert: whatever the decision, it is critical that it is clearly communicated in the organisation, particularly if the decision is a departure from previous practice.



So where should the balance lie? There is no single right answer. It has long been established that the answer to 'should a leader have at hand the answer to any question asked by their employees?' will create very different statistical norms across different cultures[1]. In Sweden and America the answer tends to be no. In Japan, Indonesia, Italy the answer tends to be yes: 'if you do not have knowledge, you will not gain our respect'.

Given this diversity of views, what can international team leaders do to resolve this dilemma? Wherever possible, it is best to ask the people concerned. For example, in one international research institute, a division of sixty people from many different countries, spent an afternoon using a nominal grouping technique agreeing the criteria that they wanted used for the selection of their project leaders. The top criteria were honesty, integrity and fairness as previously people had felt the selection of project leaders had been based on

favouritism and nepotism. With that out of the way, they thrashed out the technical versus leadership balance they felt they needed. Everyone agreed that the ensuing transparent process had been fair.

Where it is not possible to ask the future team members, then it should be clear that no one person can sanely handle both the necessary technical depth and the co-ordination of the team. If the team leader is the technical expert who will get deeply involved in the technical discussions, then he or she needs to assign the role of managing the process to another person. If the team leader's main role is perceived as co-ordinating the process, then they will need technical experts on the team. This idea of shared responsibility is discussed in more depth at the end of this chapter.

Changing the Leadership Style to Meet the Needs of the Team

Aside from the expert/leader dilemma, the other difficulty that international team leaders face is that many organisations don't consider the range of leadership styles required. There is no single style with which to lead an international team all of the time. Aside from responding to cultural differences, as highlighted in previous chapters, the team leader's style needs:

- to match the strategic focus of the team;
- to respond to different types of tasks;
- to respond to the different stages of the team's life cycle.

Matching the style to the strategic focus of the team

As highlighted in the next chapter, there are three primary strategic foci that international teams contribute to: global efficiency; local responsiveness; and organisational learning. Depending on which focus is most critical to the team will depend on what type of leadership will be most appropriate.

Three leadership approaches have been identified:

- The **advocate** who represents the team to others inside and outside the company and maintains the legitimacy of the team.
- The **catalyst** who inspires the team to do more than they thought was possible.
- The **integrator** who is able to integrate the disparate facts, ideas, perceptions and behaviours into a workable outcome.

Research on transnational teams (TTS)[2] showed that while none of the above three approaches was specifically related to global efficiency, being a catalyst and encouraging individual initiative and action was correlated to teams focusing on local responsiveness. Being an advocate, on the other hand, was correlated to teams focusing on organisational learning. This suggests that when teams are in this learning mode, it is more important for the team leader

to effectively represent the team and to anticipate and plan for change, than it is to encourage members' individuality and initiative.

Responding to different types of tasks

Cultural differences are more likely to play a stronger role in tasks that require making value judgements based on knowledge and experience than on mechanical, computational and co-ordinating tasks where the task is, by its very nature, more structured and is not necessarily demanding so much intellectual input as pointed out in Chapter Three. These more complex types of tasks are increasing.

In highly structured tasks, the leader can usefully act as a facilitator of the structured processes, a mentor to team members and as coach to develop skills. As the task becomes less structured and based more on integrating different viewpoints the team leader will also need to play a stronger, but not necessarily more authoritarian role, in structuring the process.

First, the team leader must be able to anticipate some of the difficult dynamics that may arise from different perspectives, backgrounds and power sources as highlighted in Chapters Two and Three. Then, as Martha Maznevski[3] points out, the team leader will need to inspire commitment to the team and the task as well as the confidence that the team will be able to understand each other's differences and integrate them successfully into a rich solution. The team leader will then need to role model the ability to actively take the different viewpoints into account. They also need to demonstrate that when conflicts arise, they are dealt with by explaining the factual differences between the different viewpoints, and seeking common ground, rather than suggesting that one side is right or wrong. Finally the team leader will create the focus for the team to find and develop a shared view of the outcomes and some agreed behavioural norms of how to get there.

Responding to the different stages of the team's life cycle*

Different leadership styles are also needed at different phases of the team's life cycle. The transnational team research (TTS) mentioned previously showed that advocators, entrepreneurs and visionaries are helpful for envisioning the possibilities and bringing into being what an international team can achieve.

When the teams first meet, it is more important for the leader to emphasise active inclusion of differences and individual initiative. The focus here will be on rewarding team members for generating and implementing ideas. As the team evolves the team leader's focus needs to be on integrating the differentiated activities of the team members and focusing on the common outcome. As the team matures, the team leader needs to maintain the individual initiative while

*The team life cycle model is described in full in Chapter Four.

maintaining the focus and ensuring that the outcome is well known and has legitimacy in the whole organisation. In other words, he or she will need to be working across all three roles simultaneously. Often team leaders are stronger in one role rather than in others. Some entrepreneurs and catalysts can find the integrating role tedious and mundane. As a result, some teams have opted for a change of leadership as the team begins to evolve and mature.

- ***The team leader needs to match his or her style to the focus of the team, the type of task and the stage of a team's development.***

Our attention now turns to the key responsibilities of an international team leader, which span three main areas:

- Managing boundaries: internal and external.
- Providing direction, focus and closure on the task.
- Facilitating the interaction of the team.

Managing Boundaries: Internal and External

> *'Some of the international project leaders have not realised how important it is to keep senior management informed.'*

International teams are embedded in the wider organisation that created them. They do not exist in a vacuum, nor can they perform effectively without interacting with colleagues outside the team. The international team leader has a critical role in ensuring that the team does not become too insular and fails to manage the expectations of its sponsors and stakeholders.

Creating the fit with the rest of the organisation

The team leader needs to understand how the team fits into the strategic thrust of the company. If the teamwork is spread over several years, it is very important that from the beginning the team leader has established a rapport with the team sponsor who can help anticipate and advise on strategic shifts and changes in the environment. This means that the team leader must find a way of succinctly keeping the sponsor and key resource managers informed of progress and difficulties within the team.

> *'You do not go to the quarterly progress review committee meetings with any surprises – not unless you want to get cut off at the knees.'*

In Wellcome, senior managers commented that team leaders who managed the external relationship well, in particular with key resource managers, tended to have fewer difficulties when negotiating changes to forecasts and plans and were able to get additional resources. In Seagrams, the Canadian food and drink

company, fixed-term international project teams were used as the main drivers for re-engineering. The teams were used to develop and create strategy. Four were focused on customer fulfilment in different global regions, two regional manufacturing teams, and four business sector teams covering duty free, finance, management information systems and business planning. It was the team leaders' job to sell the end product to the senior management.

A very important role for international team leaders is that of external advocate.

It is important that when undertaking this advocacy role, leaders are seen to be acting in the interests of the whole team. Some leaders of the Seagrams' teams were criticised for placing too much emphasis on the corporate reaction during the team work, agreeing too much and in one case this was perceived as the team leader positioning himself for re-entry after the end of the project teamwork. Yet, selling the team's work both up and across the organisation is important. The difficulty is knowing how much information to broadcast to whom:

> *'It is so much better than the old system – I know what is going on across the whole portfolio, instead of just parts of it – and that helps when we are reviewing stuff at the quarterly review meetings.'*
> *'It is knowing who to communicate to and when – everyone moans about information overload and then complains about not being kept in touch.'*
> *There are so many people who claim they need to know – the distribution list for our minutes has over 200 people on it.'*

One simple guideline is to make short, one page summaries for team sponsors and key stakeholders. As electronic shared databases or home pages become established, they will help in creating the ability for people to pull up the information they want rather than expecting team leaders to push it to them.

One way to include team members in this advocacy role is for the team leader to take different team members to different meetings and to include and acknowledge their contribution in preparing reports. This way, team members can assess external responses for themselves and can then actively assist in devising persuasive strategies. This encourages the team members to take more responsibility for how their work is being perceived within the organisation. It also avoids the criticism that the team leader gets and takes all the credit for everyone else's work.

The other side of advocacy role is the expectation that the team leader will minimise external interference and hindrances. He or she is expected to be a 'bureaucracy-buster'. Support systems may not have been changed to handle the cross boundary pattern of work of the international team. Senior management may not understand the importance of certain bits of technology or the need for extra travel expenses at certain times. It is usually up to the team leader to cajole, haggle and push for things to happen.

Negotiating resources

Most international projects will cross functional boundaries. This means team leaders need to liaise and work with many different line managers. If the team is composed of part-time members who are also members of other teams, the team leader has to negotiate hard with line managers on the required level of skills and potential timeframes. Sometimes they will get it wrong:

> *'The trouble is that good statisticians are in short supply and they end up on multiple projects – this is good news as far as sharing best practice goes, but can be a nightmare for timelines.'*
> *'My project leader does not understand the significance of what my department does – she is always involving me too late and then it is expected yesterday. It is not making me popular with my line manager.'*

Any department will be made up of some effective, experienced people, and some less experienced people. International team leaders will talk to each other about the experienced people and want to have them assigned to their teams. Good people can easily become overloaded if it is left to team leaders to allocate resources. However, they may feel completely dis-empowered if all staffing decisions are left to the line managers:

> *'I do not get a say about who is on my team – yet I have to manage them and still deliver – that has got to change.'*

Team leaders and line managers need to have very frequent contact and negotiations on these issues. That can be hard when they are on opposite sides of the globe. If the timing of the project is crucial then the relevant line managers need to be involved in the team design discussions.

Carrying the weight of success or failure

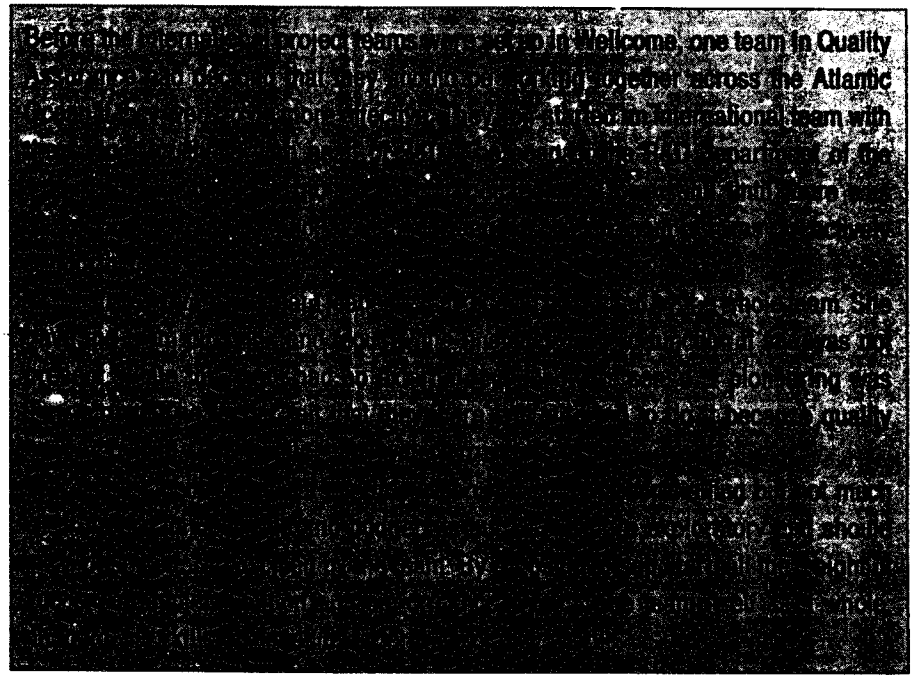
International team leaders of these often cross-functional, cross-hierarchy teams seldom have clear designated power within the organisation, yet they are still held accountable for the success or failure of the team. One of the big questions for international team leaders is, 'Who carries the weight of successful implementation and performance?' The answer depends on:

- the legitimacy the team is given within the organisation;
- the extent to which the team has control over its own resources;
- the kind of task.

The following examples demonstrate the impact of these three factors.

The authority of the international project teams within Wellcome was less than clear. While they have a high level of legitimacy within the organisation, the team leader had relatively little control over who was selected onto the team and how many resources he or she had access to. Also the success of the task (to take a potential medicine from molecule to marketplace) was not entirely within the team's control. It is purely chance as to whether a team leader is given a compound that turns out to have serious side effects or not.

So in many ways it is unclear the extent to which a team leader can be held responsible either for the total team performance or for a successful or failed outcome, i.e. a new medicine on the market. Much depends on the factors outside the team's direct control like the compound itself or the willingness of key resource people to allocate the resources the team requires.



As stressed in Chapter One, these two examples demonstrate how the weight of success is determined by the way a team is created, its task and the amount of control it has over its own resources. In general, the more control a team has, the higher the motivation to perform well. Success as well as failure will land squarely at the team and team leader's door. It also involves the whole team in learning how to manage those resources. Not all of a team leader's power will be predetermined by the above factors. It behoves any team leader to work

though all the different types of power that relate to the role and to explore which ones he/she can use to best advantage.

Providing direction, focus and closure on the task

Closely aligned to the need to manage the boundaries of an international team, an international team leader needs to be able to see the goals clearly, communicate them, keep the team focused and bring about timely closure. These aspects of the team leader's role can be seen in many organisations where international teams are rewarded primarily for their ability to deliver a particular output. Previous discussions have highlighted that this is only part of the picture, but a very critical part nevertheless. For example, in Seagrams, international team leaders were praised primarily for the task-focused aspects of their work:

- developing and managing a realistic workplan;
- providing direction;
- creating clear goals and standards of performance;
- clarifying roles;
- holding regular meetings;
- good planning and communication;
- constantly questioning the logic, pushing new thought processes;
- ensuring the team was fact based;
- reacting strongly when the process appeared to be off line;
- monitoring progress;
- bringing closure at the end.

This set of actions are very much the same whether the team is international or not. Bringing people with varied skills together to achieve what they cannot achieve alone is the whole raison d'être of teams. The key, as we have stressed in this book is in the co-ordination of those skills. That co-ordination needs to be constantly focused and refocused to be successful.

Facilitating the interaction of the team

The third area of responsibility is the one that historically has received much attention from researchers and practitioners. It has been covered fully in Chapters Four and Five. Certainly many of us carry implicit models about teams and team working that inform how we expect teams to operate and therefore how we expect the team leader to behave. For example, in the Seagrams' teams, on top of what we have already mentioned, team members were sure that their leaders should at least:

- effectively manage personal hardships;
- be available, willing to listen, give direction and take constructive criticism;
- listen to team members and participate in discussions as an equal;
- recognise that some team members need more support than others;
- ensure that the team had some fun along the way.

Of course what constitutes 'fun' could be different for every team. One team leader gained a lot of respect from his colleagues with an impromptu meeting:

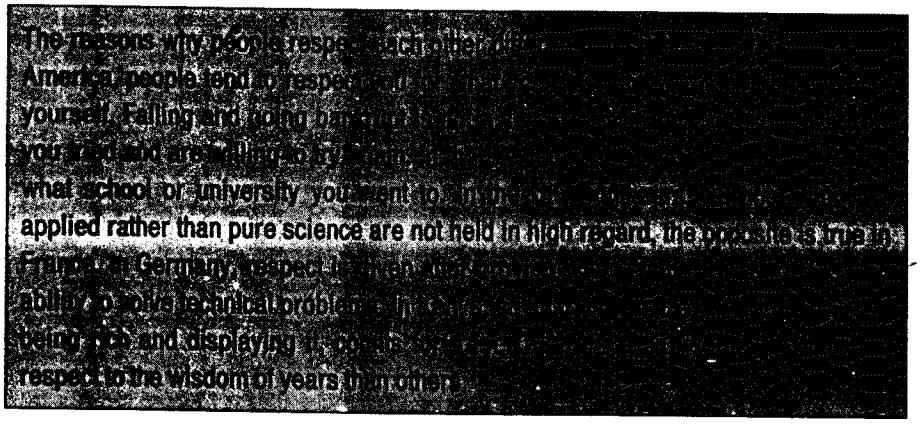
> *'We had had a really bad week. Three pm Friday afternoon, our team leader called a meeting held at a local pub with one item on the agenda: How much of the company's money could we drink? Great tension reliever.'*

In some organisations and cultures, such a gesture would have destroyed the leader's credibility. It all comes back to the message in Chapter Two – know your team.

Choosing a Culturally Appropriate Leadership Style

We have established that international team leaders need to actively create inclusive patterns of interaction. Leaders also need to gain the respect of their teams by discovering what they expect of them as a leader. A national team leader may not do this and get away with it. Many team members might share the same expectations of leadership. As pointed out in some depth in Chapter Two, this is not so in international teams.

The variance on this issue will be larger, the more diverse the team. In order to get started, the team leader needs to open up the widely different expectations about what he or she should be doing. Some awareness of potential cultural differences is important in choosing the most appropriate leadership style. The following examples illustrate how values and behaviours are seen differently by various team members.



In one quite recent international survey, the question with the largest national variance was about who wanted to be left alone to get the job done. Australians, Canadians, Swiss, French and West Germans wanted to be left alone, while Egyptians, Omanis, Singaporeans, and Venezuelans expected to be supervised[4]. Some people still prefer and presumably work best with a leader who guides them as much in how to do something as in what to do.

In some countries with long histories of dominant or colonial rule, waiting to be told is a way of keeping a distance, a self respect for your own way of seeing the world and demonstrating lack of support for the status quo. This often, almost unconscious, non-violent non-co-operation is often interpreted as laziness, backwardness or a reluctance to take responsibility. New young American managers desperate to 'empower' staff so that they can take more responsibility are often met with quiet bemusement.

Making sure your leadership style fits the over-riding cultural milieu of your team is important, however much you may like or dislike doing it. The best way to find out what is expected of you as a leader is to ask the team in a way that puts different expectations on an equal footing. The cultural value checklist exercise described in Chapters Four and Five unearths the different preferences and expectations at the beginning of the teamwork. The team can then,

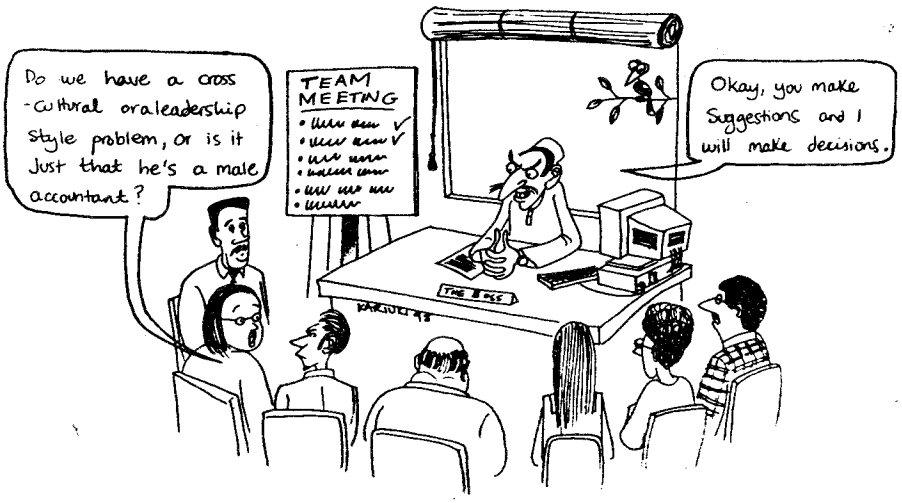


Figure 7.1: Cultural leadership

explicitly or implicitly, guide the leader towards the most appropriate style for that mix of nationalities in that organisational and cultural context.

Other Aspects of the Role

In addition to these three key areas of responsibility, international team leaders need to acknowledge four needs that will underpin their ability to perform the role in the long term. Some organisations omit to acknowledge some of the more practical aspects of being an international team leader who is often travelling across time zones and needing to make decisions in very ambiguous situations. One obvious need to prevent physical burnout is to have good physical stamina. Some managers have taken time out and realised that they had to start going to the gym or quit the job.

The second need is to have either strong supportive relationships at work and at home that can take the strain of separation, and/or a strong emotional resilience and understanding how to nourish oneself while alone in distant places. It is sometimes sad to see the number of business class managers who feel the need to get drunk and then pass out on any flight longer than four hours. A better example of sustainable leadership is demonstrated by one peripatetic manager, who always schedules an extra day on arrival and after the end of the work, just to rest, get his clothes washed and recover so that he was in good shape to do the work and to arrive home. Few are given or feel they can take the luxury.

The third need is to be able to assess the limits of one's own ethical boundaries in line with those of the company, in many ambiguous situations. It is important to have clearly sorted in one's head what you are willing to compromise on and adapt to and what you need to adhere to. With some experience and reflection, most managers see that they can acknowledge and adapt to different communication styles and different eating habits and can be flexible about how and to a lesser extent when, work gets done. Many will find that they cannot compromise on corporate and ethical principles of doing good business.

The fourth need is to be increasingly comfortable influencing, motivating and communicating across a wide variety of communication technology, as illustrated in the previous chapter. More and more correspondence is e-mail based and most managers are replying to their own e-mails, perhaps because many people write private stuff which they expect the recipients to be editing and replying to themselves. Solving interpersonal problems and making major decisions without the visual clues of being face to face is not easy.

So, even in organisations that have defined and communicated the international team leader role effectively, it is still a very challenging position, as this quote from a team colleague highlights:

> *'Our team leader should have split himself in 30 different ways. That would have helped.'*

However, in our experience to be effective, international team leaders do not have to be superhuman or heroes. Leadership in an international team requires attention to such a complexity of factors that an individual will invariably not be able to attend to all of them. In fact, many international teams, particularly when geographically dispersed, or when part of a wider network of teams, perform most effectively with shared leadership by various people in the team.

Sharing the Many Facets of the Role

Shared leadership and the support of facilitators are not a sign of weakness, they are a vital part of making international teams effective.

Not only our experience of working with a multitude of international teams has brought us to the conclusion that aspects of the leadership role can and should be shared amongst the wider team, it is also supported by research evidence.

In the video research, almost all the 'leaders' in the training teams were appointed during the course of the teamwork to manage the process of achieving the task rather than structuring the content of the task itself. They were seen as; 'someone responsible for product delivery and who should make decisions if the group reaches an impasse'.

In many teams, although these 'process' leaders contributed well, they were not perceived as having had the most influence on the team. This was usually reserved for the person who took the flipchart pen and structured the content of the outcome or presentation. The one exception was where the person chosen as team leader to manage the process, was also the person most experienced with the task. He structured and summarised all the ideas as the teamwork progressed.

In the operational teams, all the team leaders were pre-appointed, mostly by virtue of their positions within the company. What was striking was that except for one occasion, the Western based team leaders hardly ever tried to alter the 'natural flow of the discussion' by asking someone in particular to speak. This was very different in Hong Kong where the team leader often structured the conversation by asking people to speak in turn.

This research enables us to highlight implications for international team leaders. A common theme is that because the interaction processes in international teams are more complex then in national teams, it is difficult for one person to manage the process as well as the content of the task. The research findings imply that in organisations imbued with Western cultural norms and practices

(wherever they are based), the team leader will not lose much influence if they appoint someone else to look after the process. For instance to manage:

- timekeeping;
- setting agendas;
- making sure everyone is fully involved;
- summarising and checking for understanding.

The team leader can then concentrate on structuring the task. Eventually these process tasks should become second nature to the team members so that the role can be exercised by everyone or rotated between team members.

However, evidence from the video research also suggested that unless this role of process facilitation is given a proper framework, the person taking it on may have a hard time and even perhaps lose influence in the team.

> *'Look, if you are not clear how we should be doing it differently then be quiet, let's get on with the task.'*

The receiver of this sharp barb was trying to point out that a few international managers were dominating the local managers, but was not yet able to formulate the problem clearly. This is typical treatment of someone trying to change unhelpful interaction without the recognised permission or ready language to do so. Typically, unless the role is well formulated and appreciated, the team leader can have difficulty getting volunteers. Again, however, it is important to remember that in certain cultures, sharing out the leadership role may not be considered a good thing to do[5]. So the choice of how to divide the role must be culturally appropriate. Whether there is individual or shared leadership in an international team, it must be acknowledged that it is rarely a glamorous task. It can be among the hardest and most stressful jobs in the career of a manager:

> *'Since taking the job I have had a separate line installed at home – I get so many calls in the evenings because of the time difference – it was the only thing to do – at the beginning I wasn't leaving the office until gone ten and that couldn't go on.' 'If anyone asked, I do not think I would recommend it – unless of course, you do not want a home life!'*

and at the same time, it can be highly rewarding:

> *'I cannot think of a time in my career when I have had more fun, more influence or learned so much in a short space of time. It has been great.'*

Summary of Key Learning Points

- *Clarify and manage expectations.*
- *Decide on the balance of technical vs leadership skills and communicate it.*
- *Match leadership style to the needs of the team.*
- *Balance all three areas of responsibility: managing boundaries, task and interaction.*
- *Pay attention to your own needs.*
- *Share the responsibilities amongst the wider team in a culturally appropriate way.*