

## Act Global, Think Local

Although quite different in makeup and operation, dispersed teams and local teams share some important characteristics. All successful teams need to be well designed. That includes defining the purpose of the team, building in project management expertise, defining team member roles, and setting a clear direction toward completing assigned work. Perhaps most important, there must be clear and measurable goals and objectives that are understood by all members. To be effective, both kinds of teams have to coordinate and interweave a series of complex tasks.

The importance of team composition is another shared characteristic. Leaders pay careful attention to individual and team-level attributes and how they combine to form the team. Those attributes include things such as competence, the desire to work on a team, and whether members have similar jobs and interests.

Teamwork and trust are other attributes essential to both dispersed and local teams. On effective teams, members work together on tasks. Communication—sending, receiving, and interpreting information—and interpersonal relationships play a large part in determining the success of both kinds of teams. Both kinds meet regularly to report progress and refine tactics.

If dispersed and local teams are so similar, you might ask why it takes special attention to lead a dispersed team. The answer lies in their differences, which paradoxically can appear in the same areas as their similarities. When it comes to team design and structure, for example, scheduling difficulties can create significant project management challenges. Timelines and agendas, budgets, physical distance, time differences, and other factors can affect team member roles and make it more difficult to maintain a clear direction.

Differences in team composition also come into play. Because the members of dispersed teams have greater cultural differences, more awareness and tolerance are required when it comes to interpersonal relations. Without that awareness and tolerance, teamwork and trust are adversely affected, making it more difficult for the team to communicate and make decisions.

### **Membership and Trust**

Leaders who promote a strong sense of membership in their dispersed teams go a long way toward developing trust among the members. Veterans of dispersed teams mention several tactics leaders can adopt to create a sense of membership.

- Keep the team informed of long-term organizational changes.
- Ask the team for input on critical organizational issues.
- Make time for team-building activities.
- Encourage personal contact and communication among all members.
- Hold face-to-face meetings.

### **Leadership That Exploits Advantages**

Dispersed teams require more direct and careful maintenance than local teams to reach their full potential. Team leaders who pay attention to the pluses and minuses of dispersed teams can design tactics and techniques that address specific concerns and increase team effectiveness. For example, one advantage enjoyed by dispersed teams is that they can work around the clock. Members on one side of the world can read e-mail, respond to problems, and get back to their counterparts on the other side of the world before their workday begins.

Dispersed teams can also be a richer source of organizational innovation than local teams. A larger perspective helps dispersed teams solve problems quickly. Insights from colleagues around the world bring new dimensions to the work. Members can draw on cultural differences to access and understand viewpoints and opinions of others, which may, for example, influence how products and services are delivered to clients. Dispersed teams are able to gather information and feed solutions to the organization that might otherwise be unavailable or take too much time to obtain.

On an individual level, members of dispersed teams enjoy some advantages over their counterparts serving on local teams. For example, as members learn about cultural differences through their work with others, they can develop more agile emotional competencies that enhance all of their work relationships. Members also gain international business knowledge and build resiliency by expanding their personal and professional networks. They gain a sense of empowerment through the autonomy that often accompanies the responsibility of serving on a dispersed team.

### **Leadership That Mitigates Disadvantages**

As powerful as these group and individual advantages are, without effective leadership they can be undermined by disadvantages common to dispersed teams. The most significant disadvantages fall into two categories: problems with communication processes and problems with project management systems.

Leaders of dispersed teams need to be aware that communication skills are critically important to their team's effectiveness. The opportunities for misunderstandings (communicating in different languages and from the perspectives of different cultures remains problematic) are far greater on a dispersed team than on a local one. Communication problems are exacerbated by the lack of face-to-face contact and an absence or severe reduction of nonverbal

## Dispersed Team Members Have a Love-Hate Relationship

<i>Dispersed team members love . . .</i>	<i>but they hate . . .</i>
new communication technology	technology breakdowns or not knowing how to use it
exposure to and learning from new ideas and methods	not understanding how something works at a different site
learning about different cultures	misunderstandings that result from speaking different languages
being able to travel to interesting sites and countries	the travel time and lengthy meetings they have once or twice a year
that they are capable of 24-hour problem solving and customer response	that they are expected to be available to respond to the customer around the clock
the autonomy—no one looking over your shoulder	feeling out of the loop and isolated

signs (body language is a major information conduit between people). Correspondence by e-mail, phone, and fax can leave out a lot of fine points and leave the team grappling with generalities and abstractions.

Further, dispersed teams face significant difficulty sharing information inside the group and with those outside if its members move into and out of the team. Local teams can depend on the organization's bench strength to recruit and develop new members, but dispersed teams often require a more selective recruitment process. Some organizations may assign people to dispersed teams

as a developmental opportunity and give only second thought to the skills and attributes they bring to the team.

Project management is also a difficult challenge for leaders of dispersed teams. As the distance between members grows, it becomes more difficult to schedule dates and times for meetings. Coordinating the team's effort is harder than it is for local teams. Many organizations don't provide strong enough support for dispersed teams, which need a more robust infrastructure than local teams in order to counter the effects of distance, time, and culture. Members can often feel as though there are no decision-making capabilities, no authority, too much politicking with internal stakeholders, and too little attention paid to outside stakeholders like clients and customers.