



Leading International Teams: A New Discipline?

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Leading International Teams: A New Discipline?

Is leading an international team a new discipline of management? One could argue NO and say it's just like leading any team with the usual features plus the cross-cultural dimensions. Or one could think YES because the intertwined cultural mind-sets produce a new melange that significantly changes the way the teams need to be managed. If you want to ensure the success of international teams it is critical to have an opinion about this watershed question.

This article is distinctly of the opinion that 'YES' is the correct answer. Please see for yourself whether you agree.

The first and most obvious factor which makes an international team special is the **language difference**: People can **not** communicate their innermost desires, considerations and feelings as fast and as free of misunderstanding in a language that is not their native language (it is difficult enough when a team communicates in one mother tongue). Everything takes longer, is more stripped to the bare bone and less refined in its expression. Although the language factor is pretty obvious when working with an international team, its impact on the cohesion of the team is frequently underestimated. Team members usually hope for the best and display stoic patience in the face of miscommunication. It's sometime surprising to see team participants stop their initial effort to learn the common language (usually English), long before they have acquired an appropriate level of mastery.

With the different languages come cultural differences with their various **mentalities, mind-sets and habits**. The differences are sometimes subtle, and sometimes more obvious. Often in the heat of events, with tight schedules, scarce resources, conflicting interests, and demanding stakeholders team members may fall back to their basic behavioral modes, to the point that the learned (or trained) cross-cultural way of handling communication and agreement goes out of the window. For example the German engineer, used to a structured problem solving approach, may not be willing to allow for the more pragmatic flexible mode of an Anglo-Saxon engineer.

Sometimes, the joint **professional or organizational culture** works as an enabler to liaise people from different cultural mind-sets. For instance, the training of electrical engineers implies shared methods and paradigms irrespective of national cultures. This provides a common language and a logical framework in which to do business.

However, the leader of an international project team needs to be prepared to handle dynamics that are different from what he/she has seen so far.



Working principles with international teams

In this article, we will not discuss the preliminary steps of selecting the team members, a task which needs consideration with regards to the readiness for working in an international assignment. We focus on a team already composed.

The first concern should be to create a **leadership team** that is capable of absorbing, reflecting and working out the cultural aspects of the needs and challenges facing the team. A (functioning) team of leaders is better able to understand the issues in the most critical phases from different cultural angles and can offer adequate steps to overcome hurdles. One single person acting as the leader would likely be biased in her/his own cultural ways or could be regarded as being biased. Alternatively for one single person to master the leadership task he/she would need to be highly experienced with an established reputation as a leader able to work with people of different nationalities.

In a team, chances are that people will have different agendas. That's actually one reason in favor of using a team approach. In an international team, people express these different agendas in a language that one masters to varying degrees and they will have culturally specific expectations of how to work them through.

For this reason, the leadership should **clarify at the beginning** together with the team:

- What are the goals, expected outcomes and how much does one expect to commit in terms of resources and time?
- What issues need to be tackled, in which priority?
- What are the different organizational agendas, what are personal agendas, how does one make sense of what happens in the team?
- Which methods of working on an issue are best to allow for everybody's input? Does the team have a consensus around work methods?

In the beginning phase of a team development, people tend to be polite and unaware of their differing assumptions. The real clashes will emerge later in the work life. Nevertheless, it's important to **lay the ground rules in the beginning and to revisit them** as the team goes along and creates a life and an experience. For instance, a team may have agreed to the principle of 'developing different viewpoints into full-blown alternatives and deciding among them in cases of conflict'. In the heat of a debate, members of sub-teams may be tempted to undermine the opposite alternative even before it is completely expressed. A break and a reminder of the principle would help to work through this tight spot.

How things go awry



Chances are that differing opinions will **escalate in conflicts**, as communication is not robust enough to resolve disputes. This happens in teams all the time and is part of the creative potential of diversity. However, in an international team, conflicts may arise along the cultural divisions and consequently become emphasized through culture-specific modes of handling conflicts.

In an US-German project team, whose task was to develop a new product for the US and European market, the team started out with a discussion concerning the first two lines of the table below. **As there was no agreement on the methods to follow** the team gradually slid into the interactions stated in the lines below (third line and following).

German Participants	American Participants
Patterns of interaction	
Prefer to work in a solidly structured way, standardized	Prefer a less detailed structure, more room for variation and flow of ideas
With a long range planning of what to do and how to connect tasks (2 years)	Planning range significantly shorter, connecting tasks in a detailed way only 3 months ahead
When difficulties arise, the grip becomes tougher, the bite firmer Grinding solutions / emotionally more aggressive Increased input of energy, time and commitment	When difficulties arise, they look for a smarter way to do the work Slowing down of speed and energy Less likely to increase commitment Less emotionally intense
Leaders (GER) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress goals • Become somewhat impatient • Demonstrate urgency • Focus on tasks only • May even attack or discount problem solving competency of workforce 	Leaders (US) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivate and coach • Demonstrate concern for moral of team • Show patience and persistence • Openly show dependence on problem solving competency of workforce
Employees (GER) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tend to accept this mixture of task and relationship oriented stress • Perform better in the short run • Show irritation and frustration in 	Employees (US) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refuse to collaborate with German leadership style • Become evasive, aloof, inaccessible



the long run	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can stay committed as long as they are motivated by the task	

As these are discussions with immediate consequences and the work methods in question are part of people's habits and success patterns, it becomes quite frightening when a German is being asked to let go of a structured way of working. In his eyes, this is a doomed approach that only can produce chance results. In much the same way, the structured approach for an American is suspect as being too rigid and too inflexible to cater for the specific needs of a solution.

As long as the level of tension is low, the stakes are easy and a compromise can be achieved. **As soon as the stakes are higher**, e.g. the work plan for the project needs to be established and the time range of the planning period has to be discussed, **compromise is harder to achieve**.

At this stage people may start to feel offended. They believe the compromise is not fair, they have come out second, or they are not convinced that the compromise will stand the test of time. **They start to look for souls of similar attitudes** and they know where to find them, most likely within the same culture group. This was manifested in our example through behind-the-scenes conversations of like-minded people, always of the same culture group, that expressed their biased observations of e.g. management not taking a firm enough lead (Germans) or management not giving enough leeway and support (US).

Now we have the **melange of a layer of culture with a conflicting issue underneath**. How can we dissociate these two equally important dimensions? The answer is: hardly ever. One has to accept the entire dynamic and not separate the parts at this stage. **How does one handle this melange in a team's work process?**

Interventions to mitigate conflicts

Chances are that the leadership group (that's why a group is essential) is able to **identify the topics** about which the people in the team disagree. The leadership team doesn't need to get it right the first time. As long as they come up with a draft, the team will happily refine and complete it.

Also at this stage it pays to have one or two consultants on board who facilitate the team and consult with the leadership group from the start. Their experience and independence can provide an additional feedback on how to proceed.

The discriminating topics can be understood as **frames of reference** through which one tends to view the teamwork, him/herself and the others.

One example from the previously quoted US-German team looked like this:

Frames of Reference



<i>American</i>	<i>German, Site 1</i>	<i>German, Site 2</i>
Loyalty: We have 2/3 of market, but only 1/3 of influence	Loyalty: Our division/site	Loyalty: Our division/site
Habits: Expect more relationship building Pragmatic Short term planning	Habits: Not aligned Complex/complicated Low drive/confidence Competent	Habits: High aligned Organised Aggressive Competent
Ambition: Success, learning	Ambition: Complete/finish	Ambition: Direct-control, learning
Desired Role: Equal partner	Desired Role: Lead partner	Desired Role: Supplier
Real role: Junior partner	Real role: Junior partner	Real role: Driver

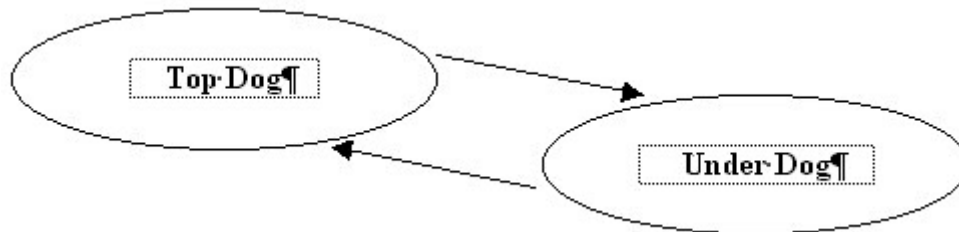
The topics that divided the different 'frames of reference' and constituted sub teams have been concluded from the experience of working with the entire team. The differences in loyalty, work habits, ambition, desired roles and real roles became apparent in significant interactions of the groups.

The German team was divided in two as they belonged to two sites with different agendas. This is a fine demonstration that national culture is not everything in a cross-cultural team. But the resolution of the conflicts between these two sub-teams proved not to be much easier, despite the shared language.

Conflict resolution is many times more complicated as the **conflicting interests soon become organized as parties**, which then tend to start to interact with the other parties in a way that seeks an advantage.

In our example we found this mode of acting:

Competing interaction of sub-teams



This mode is used to establish

- **How to cope with risky situations**
- **How to influence an ambiguous partner**

<i>Task Behavior</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assertive • Aggressive • Controlling • Very active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecure • Cautions • Slow • Irritated
<i>Relationship Behavior</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very vocal • Very manipulative • Taking over • Assuming responsibility • Feeling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frustrated • powerless • angry • hostile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defensive • Withdrawal • Confusion • Refusing Responsibility • Feeling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frustrated • dominated • overwhelmed • hostile

One German sub-team became very active when difficulties arose and as a consequence took over. The other two groups felt more insecure and as a consequence withdrew (the US sub-team) or acted confused (the other German sub-team).

How can the team change this course of events?

First, the leadership team - and in case consultants are involved – with the consultants try to discover the relevant dynamics and dividing topics in the team. They present a draft of it to the team members.

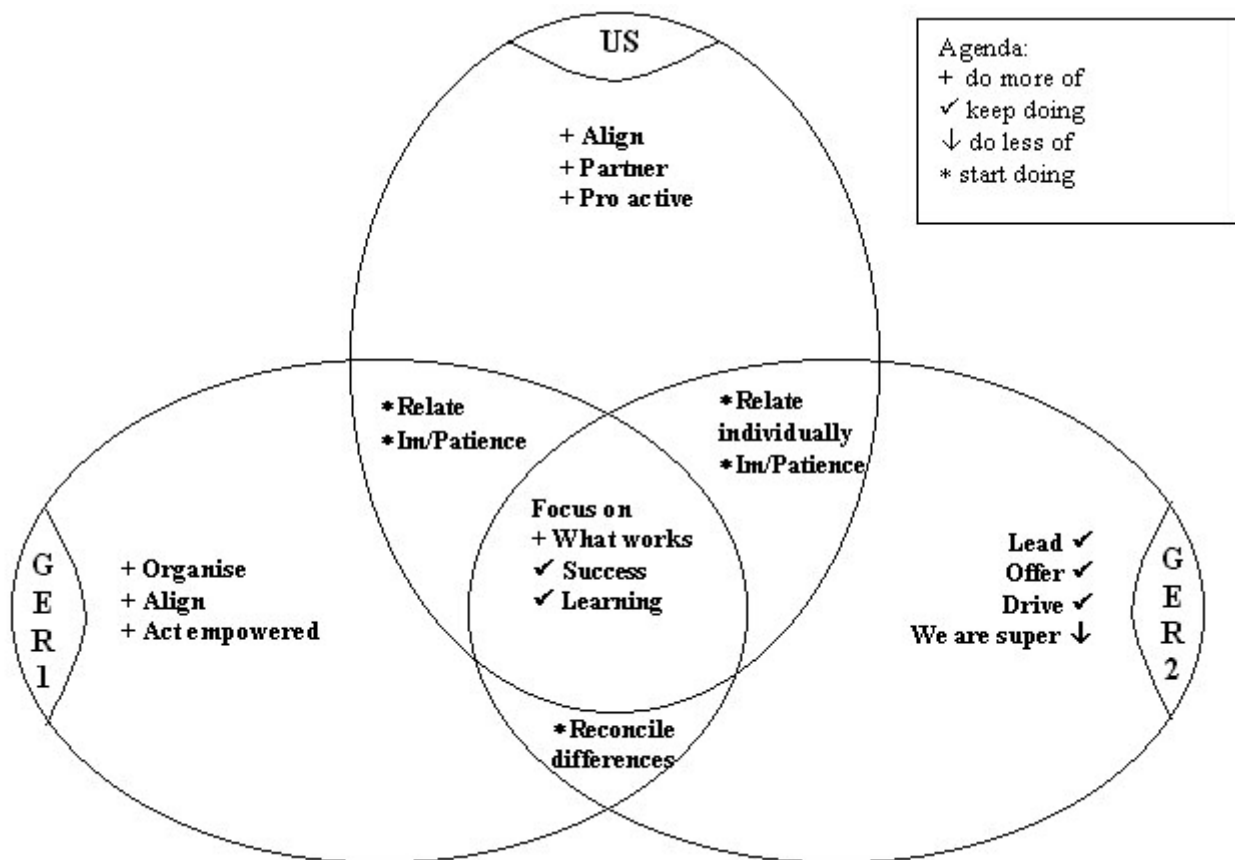
Second, with this draft about the dividing topics the entire team discusses the different frames of reference, refines them and understands how these topics divide the entire team into sub teams.



Third, the sub teams can now discover and discuss what sets them apart, what the concerns are, how they relate and do business with each other, and after a creative break, preferably over night, the sub teams,

Fourth, discuss and plan new forms of interaction that will likely create a better synergy. In our example, the blueprint looked like this:

How to Create/Enhance Cohesion and Productivity



Each sub team was asked by the leaders to identify the changes they needed to work on. The 'German 2' team offered to keep delivering its ideas and inputs but it would abstain from its preferred attitude of "superman", an attitude that made it hard for the rest to accept its input. The others welcomed this.

Each sub team presented their conclusions and wanted to get approval from the other sub teams. The sub-teams also identified how they would improve their cross-(sub team)-border collaboration.

E.g. the US sub-team offered to liaise more with the two German teams by sending their members off to the German sites to better understand their work habits and their body of knowledge. This would in return enable the US team to become a more knowledgeable, pro-active business partner in this joint venture.



Conclusion I

In order to achieve a level of creative synergy teams need to leverage their differences rather than fight over them. But they need to resolve conflicts and this normally implies some sort of fighting. Cross-cultural teams need to understand the necessity of competition within a collaborative setting. They need to compete with their ideas, as it is absolutely not clear whose idea works best in the circumstances. Through challenging each other they build on each other's ideas to find the best solution possible.

The stakes are high in international teams, which by itself creates tension and a sense of risk of failure. The language abilities and the culture-specific mind-sets may constitute disadvantages to work through the challenges.

Enabling moves in an international team are to thoroughly **identify goals and desired outcomes**, and to **clarify the expectations about work methods**. It's likely that compromises achieved in the inaugurating sessions will unravel in the heat of events.

Once this happens, the leadership and the consultants should enable the team to **discover the dividing issues and the concerns involved**. From a better and renewed understanding of the concerns, effective ways to cope with them will result in new creative ways of working together.

These events may occur and **re-occur several times** – specifically in the course of a large project – but **each loop will result in a higher level of synergy**.

Conclusion II

It is very useful to expose the members of international teams to **cross cultural training before they start**. However, one should not expect this knowledge to be sufficient to overcome all the hurdles of miscommunication. The decisive moments to apply this knowledge hit the teams most often in phases of high tension when refined behavior modes are going to be replaced by robust tactics.

The interventions and moves to resolve these deadlocks need to focus on the real work issues or the team dynamic. Culture does not seem to be an issue and is most of the times not a feasible target in these situations. **But the interventions need to take into account the meaning of culture and its twist on the topic**. And of course, back into a more reflective mode, the impact of culture can and should be identified and its implications understood to improve the functioning of the team.

Leaders (and members) of international teams need to know that from start to finish everything has a cultural twist to it. Sometimes this cultural twist can be addressed specifically, sometimes only implicitly and sometimes not at all. But it should be always on the mind that any issue can be more 'loaded' with culture than assumed and needs to be handled in a more culture-aware manner. This constant readiness to 'think culture' which shows in the ability to discover and handle cultural impacts on both the task and people level indeed make leading international teams a new management discipline.