

managing worldwide

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Editorial

Based on our customers' experience, managing operations in India poses several kinds of difficulties to Western head-office teams. Let me focus on the top 3 where cultural misunderstandings are heavily involved. From the perspective of the head office, their Indian colleagues:

- seem less and less motivated over time (related to high personnel turnover)
- rarely fill the full scope of what is expected from them (don't feel empowered, don't understand, etc.)
- do not deliver on time while meeting quality requirements

For the first two items, we generally work closely with our customer to:

- build employee loyalty programs which encompass both national and corporate culture
- redefine roles, goals and KPI's
- improve the communication skills of operational managers & communication departments

In the case presented by Sunita in this newsletter, time management was probably the most tricky issue. It was only in the last hours of a two-day training seminar that Indian teams dared say *'We regularly work long hours, long nights and week-ends on projects driven by head-office. All they seem to remember is when we missed a deadline by a few days, or when we delivered on time but the quality was not quite what they had expected.'* And another person added *'...we all know that, over there, in head-office, they are having their week-ends and don't work more than 40 to 45 hours (dixit) per week'.*

At that point, we knew that trust had been fully established with us, but also that future training sessions were going to take a different flavor! From there on, we worked on how to convey trust across the ocean. Back in head-office training rooms, we started working on how to convey the fact that Indians were fully part of the team. Great results!



Laurent Lepez, Associate Partner

" Offshoring: managing an Indian team from headquarters "

by Sunita Nichani, Senior Consultant

It is a widely acknowledged fact that offshoring to India has many advantages: a young, skilled and abundant workforce eager to gain knowledge, lower wage costs, value-added services, etc. However, managing a team that sits half-way across the globe definitely poses logistical challenges due to a heavy reliance on virtual communication. Yet another factor that impacts the efficiency of offshoring operations is the confrontation of different world views that must be understood by all concerned.

More about pleasing than pleasure

Let's examine an Indian work practice that seems incomprehensible to the Western world. The Indian concept of time certainly has been a frustration for many managers at headquarters. The joke often goes that IST (Indian Standard Time) refers to Indian stretchable time, where deadlines do not get met and very often the bad news is delivered at the last moment. From the Indian point of view, they do their best to complete the work within the required time frame which they secretly consider unrealistic but they are willing to try to please their headquarters. To Indians, business is more about pleasing than pleasure. Their sense of let down is real when their effort to deliver on time is judged purely on results and not on effort. Indian teams sometimes confide their resentment over this issue by saying that they are working with deadlines that the workforce in the West would never accept. Their deadlines, which are often committed to by team leaders in India, require them to work late and even on weekends, while their Western counterparts cannot be contacted over the weekend or on holidays. This is therefore clearly an emotionally charged situation for both teams that inevitably affects productivity.

Pushback = risky + inefficient + disrespectful

In the particular case of one European customer, after we had delivered intercultural training first in headquarters and then in India, a facilitated discussion between the two sides has certainly helped in arriving at more realistic time schedules.

" Managing an Indian team from headquarters " (continued)

It has also helped the Indian team to raise red flags as soon as they realize that deadlines are not going to be met. After the training too, with Indian team members understanding that pleasing was more about following through than trying, finetuned procedures were put in place and rather well implemented. Finally, the most difficult part was learning to push back against tight or impossible deadlines. The Indian team considered it a risky attitude for them, as individuals and as a team, even inefficient and disrespectful of their counterparts.

"it's not a right, it's a must!"

So we realized that there were lessons for their European colleagues as well. We had secured with senior management the permission to promote messages for the Indian team such as "the right to say no". Some senior managers even went so far as to say "when they know they can't do it, it's not a right, it's a must!" Obviously, operational teams in headquarters did not take it so lightly and we had to work with them in order to make this fly.

Another point with Europeans was raising their level of trust in the ability of their Indian colleagues to come up in due time with a creative solution. Generally speaking, in the Indian scenario, planning your time and tasks in great detail is not very common because too many parameters beyond your control can throw schedules out of gear. Indians are generally better at reacting and

troubleshooting than at time planning. In India, this ability to improvise a solution and to take on what life throws at you is called jugaad. Instead of laying emphasis purely on deadlines and procedures (which are of course vital), the real synergies came when the Europeans progressively opened up to innovative solutions that sprang from the Indian jugaad. For instance, they were pleasantly surprised to see the ingenious solution of time management put in place to expedite work. The Indians had in fact organized two shifts to increase productivity with the morning shift doing the preparatory work so that the evening shift that could take over seamlessly.

5% in relationship

Despite huge pressure on the European teams, we found it extremely efficient to teach them to spend 5% of the time they dedicate to a meeting (or to writing an e-mail) to building rapport, and nurturing relationships with their Indian colleagues. Taking the time to build a relationship with the Indian team after less than a year made a world of difference.

Mini bio: Sunita Nichani



Sunita has more than 15 years experience working with European, US and Indian teams. Head of Corporate Training at the Alliance Française of Madras, she designs, develops content and delivers culture sensitization and business etiquette workshops for multinational companies based in India and trains Indian teams to work with Europe and the US. She speaks English, French, Hindi, Tamil and Sindhi fluently.

Cultural Tips

How to manage an Indian team from headquarters?

- 1 – Build KPI's, incentive and loyalty programs founded as much as possible on Indian values
- 2 – Have both parts reflect on how to convey trust to the other side
- 3 – Promote actively the "5% investment in relationship" policy.
It might be one of your headquarters' best pay-off!