

/// Achieving World-Class Performance

In A Multi-National/Multi Cultural Environment

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You find yourself coming out of a meeting where your boss informed you (and everyone else) that you have just been promoted! Due a merger between your company and another business, you are now the leader of a global team. Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to develop a world-class, high performance work team utilizing combined

personnel from several countries and multiple cultures. Piece of cake, right? Many of us today are finding ourselves in this or similar situations. What do you do first? Where do you go for help? What is “normal”? And is it enough to ensure that you have diversity on your team? What does world-class performance look like in a multi-national/multi-cultural environment? How does one achieve high quality, provide value-added service, value diversity, understand different



cultures, appreciate individual personalities, and still blend all this into a high quality high performance work team? We believe that the answer is two-fold: accomplishing the four key objectives that define a High Performance Work Team and fully understanding the subtleties and nuances of a multi-national/multi-cultural team environment.

X-Stream Leadership Group uses the following definition for a High Performance Work Team:

- **Focus**

The hallmark of a High Performance Work Team is a clear focus on specific goals and objectives and understanding what the team is doing at all times. The fastest way to fail is to try to be everything to everybody. By learning how to establish unambiguous goals and objectives, you can increase your ability to achieve those goals and significantly improve your chances of success.

- **Accountability**

A major aspect of a High Performance Work Team is developing the understanding that objectives must be achieved and actions completed when promised. A key lesson is that people will live up to your expectations... they also will live down to your expectations as well. So set the bar high. Strongly emphasize the positive aspects of success but also establish that failure to meet these expectations will have negative consequences for the individual and the organization. Raising the level of understanding and “buy-in” to this concept is critical in order to truly perform to its highest potential.



- **Discipline**

The leader must develop within the team the expectation that they will be asked to work harder, change faster, learn a different approach, or learn to be persistent. A great example is an Olympic athlete. While we may run for fun or for our health, we accept many excuses for why we skip a day. An Olympic athlete is an Olympic athlete because he/she maintains the discipline to train no matter the weather, no matter the situation, or no matter that doing something else would be more fun. They have the discipline to be committed to their decision to be the best-of-the-best. That is also the hallmark of a High Performance Work Team: the discipline to meet goals and objectives without excuse or delay.

- **A Precise Understanding of What Constitutes Success**

A major failure mode for most organizations is having a poor (or even no) definition of what constitutes success. Almost anything can be submitted to meet a goal or objective and be called successful if there are no clear definitions of what constitutes acceptable success. Trust me, your team members know immediately when this happens! Few things are more frustrating than working extremely hard and not knowing whether you actually succeeded. Making the effort to clearly define success before one even begins is critical in order to know how you are doing, whether you are ahead or behind schedule, and what is required to achieve your goal. It is often very difficult to get a clear definition of a successful outcome. However, failure to achieve this in the beginning guarantees a mediocre outcome that may or may not be acceptable to the organization or its customers.

Can You Say “World-Class” in Five Languages?

Now that we have defined what a High Performance Work Team is in a general sense, let us look at how we accomplish this in a multi-national/multi-cultural environment. First, spend the time to truly understand exactly who your new teammates are and what makes them tick. How do they view the world? What do they currently consider “high quality” and “high performance”? How do they currently work together as a team and what techniques do they use to get the job done? Many people are under the impression that if you simply pull together a diverse team, that alone somehow magically solves your problem. Nothing could be further from the truth! Just being diverse in today’s environment is not nearly enough. High quality performance and world-class teamwork takes hard work, true dedication, and constant focus, no matter where your team members come from, or what their level of experience is prior to joining your team. The trick is in blending these team members from many different backgrounds, countries, and cultures into one cohesive team that is completely focused on achieving very specific goals and objectives.





Let us look at some examples of world-class, high quality, high performance organizations currently operating in a multi-national/multi-cultural environment. Even though people tire of hearing about Toyota, they continue succeeding beyond all expectations in the multi-national/multi-cultural arena. People initially thought that the Toyota model was successful simply because of the characteristics of the Japanese culture and how the Japanese workers approached their jobs. What we found was that it was not a cultural effect at all. Toyota achieved significantly better success than other Japanese businesses (and the rest of the world) because of their approach to Standard Work and sustaining teams that are unrelenting in their drive for Continuous Improvement. Toyota now has plants and facilities all over the world and a workforce that seamlessly incorporates numerous cultural differences while executing the Toyota Production System and they routinely achieve results that far surpass their competition as demonstrated by their reported Operating Margins Quarter after Quarter! Another great example is Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart has become one of the largest organizations in the world with employees representing all walks of life and cultures in today's workplace. No matter what store or what part of the organization you observe in Wal-Mart you quickly realize that the underlying driving focus is on driving out cost and waste found in every part of every process and operation. No matter how small or how inexpensive it may seem, they are relentless in their drive to eliminate it from their system. They have a single-minded desire to eliminate every penny possible from their operations. It may only be a penny per step, but if you multiply that times the millions of times that process or operation occurs daily in an organization as large as Wal-Mart and you quickly find that you have saved your customer millions of dollars. Wal-Mart Associates know from the very first day of their employment that this is of paramount importance to them and how they work within the system. While some stores are cleaner than others and some have better customer service than others, you can bet that they ALL have the same culture of reducing costs wherever and however possible!

Additionally, military Special Forces teams accomplish this as well by taking candidates from all walks of life and creating very high performance teams that can accomplish things that are truly miraculous. Special Forces Teams are placed into training situations that are specifically designed so that no one person can possibly solve the problem or accomplish the task at hand by themselves. Only by working together as a team can they accomplish their mission or achieve their objective. They quickly learn that they each bring very special skills and abilities to the team and that the blending of these skills and capabilities make the team far more effective than any one or two team members could be on their own. They don't care where you came from nearly as much as they care about what you can do to help the team and how well do you work with the others to get the job done!

What makes these organizations so successful in their differing and challenging environments? They all have a demonstrated ability to blend their team members into a highly focused entity that shares a common bond while targeting a well defined strategy with common goals or objectives. Many organizations have tried this business model and met with limited or no success, and yet these are only a few examples of organizations that not



only succeed in the multi-national/multi-cultural environment, they thrive in this environment. Is it because of their use of diversity? Is it simply a matter of their size, allowing them economies of scale that are unmatched by their competitors? Or, are they doing something fundamentally different than the rest of us?

First Steps

The new leader of an organization often begins with the assumption that a memo to the new employees that states “new team members will receive training in our procedures and our processes” is sufficient to get the job done. Others assume that site visits and conversations with their new employees and an effort to simply select the best practices and procedures from each organization is all that it takes. Although these approaches are good, we believe the answer to developing a high quality, high performance, world-class operation requires far more in terms of significant understanding, insight, and commitment of the leadership team.



Here is where I am going to deviate from the politically correct mantra of today’s business world. First, let me say that diversity, for the right reasons, is a good thing. But diversity for diversity’s sake can be more harmful than beneficial. Allowing members to focus more on their differences than on the goal can be divisive. Real strength is in unity! The secret to creating a high quality, high performance work team is the ability to use the strengths of each team member and the blending of their different viewpoints, personalities, cultures, processes, procedures, and operations into a tight, cohesive team that has bonded by overcoming shared adversity. To develop a strong multi-cultural team, the leader must be someone who is comfortable with that challenge – someone who can mold all of the different perspectives and personalities each member brings to the team into one way of doing business and establishing one organizational standard of performance. We believe very strongly this has been critical to Toyota’s success and their ability to achieve significant results no matter where they build their factories in the world. We believe it is this same concept that allows Wal-Mart to dominate their market space, no matter where they put a new store.

Learn To Observe In Order To Learn To Lead!

The leader must take the time and put forth the effort to truly understand all of the individuals that make up the team. One cannot underestimate the need to be observant and to do one’s homework in this situation. Many of the differences between countries and cultures are very subtle and extremely easy to overlook or misunderstand. Others are quite obvious. Anyone from outside the United States who has ever worked with people from the United States will quickly tell you that U. S. workers and managers are confident (sometimes to the point of appearing arrogant), direct and to the point, and quite focused on achieving results as quickly as possible. As a culture, Americans highly value individualism. It is often very easy to read



and understand facial expressions and body language with Americans. They typically are uncomfortable with silence and will speak to avoid uneasy pauses and breaks in the conversation. Professionals from Japan are just as focused on results, but they observe strict formalities in their personal and team interactions and place a very high value on loyalty and teamwork. In Russia, patience is considered to be an extremely important virtue. They will deliberately provoke someone to judge their patience – and hence, worthiness - as a business or negotiating partner. Often, they will arrive late to a meeting for the same reason. Americans place great value on the signing of contracts and consider that action as the completion of the negotiations process. In some Asian countries, the signing of the contract signals the beginning of the real negotiations! When working with the Chinese, you should always have the most important member of your team lead meetings and discussions because the Chinese place great emphasis on rank and status. When working with people from Asia, one needs to keep in mind that showing proper respect is valued above all else.



Significant cultural differences can be found even within a single country! A very revealing story of how powerful cultural influences can be, even within a larger shared culture, occurred when two large American aerospace firms merged in the 1990s. One was very formal and had a culture that was fairly rigid. The other had a more relaxed culture but was equally successful in the marketplace. The first meeting between the executives of the two firms resulted in one side, very predictably, wearing suits with ties and the other side in “business casual” attire. The atmosphere was awkward to say the least. The very next meeting, the first side attended the meeting dressed in “business casual” and the other team came in suits and ties! The awkwardness was quickly dissipated amid laughs and the realization of what had just transpired. Both groups were trying to acknowledge and accommodate the others general approach and style. That flexibility cleared the path for the eventual development of a mutual culture that would become a blend of the two businesses.

Face Time

These examples reveal some of the very basic differences that exist between countries and cultures. World-travelers reading this article will recognize most or maybe all of these traits and can probably add countless others. But my question is this: If so many of us struggle with these obvious traits, how many more subtle or not so well-known cultural behaviors do we miss or never understand? One could easily assume that the Russian team member that is displaying his or her temper is simply being disruptive, or that the French team member that is constantly arguing is trying to derail the team. Yet, the Russian is simply trying to determine what the other team members are “made of” and the French employee highly values the ability of an individual to defend one’s position through the use of rational argument.



Too often we assume that others see the world as we do, and so we set out to simply tackle the job at hand with the same techniques that worked for us in the past. When working with a multi-national or multi-cultural team, it is critical to understand each member as an individual before you can begin to effectively communicate with or understand their actions as a team. Do not underestimate the critical importance of individual relationships and the nuances of the social interaction required to generate the results you desire. It is also important to understand the need for “face time” – in person communications. You must be able to see the person you are speaking with to read their body language, gauge their level of understanding, and build a strong relationship. Phones and e-mail are of little use in this aspect of team development and can actually create misunderstandings and do damage to the team. Make the commitment to visit your team members and work with them in person as much as possible. A good leader works diligently to ensure he or she does not fall into the trap of making assumptions and stereotyping people. The leader can accomplish this by learning as much as possible about the differences in cultures and the values of their people. Consider, as an example, the situation of the U.S. manager who begins working with and leading a Japanese team. What has worked for the American previously, in terms of motivating people and accomplishing tasks in his culture, could easily be seen as rude and obnoxious behavior to the new Japanese team members. Rather than simply adapting to the new American manager’s style, the team could very easily simply isolate the manager as a way to curb – or at least protest - what they consider to be unacceptable behavior.

Another key component to keep closely in mind is the issue of language, especially when team members are not working in their native tongue. Many words do not translate well, or won’t mean the same thing to different people. Neither side may realize that there has been a misunderstanding until it is far too late and considerable damage has been done. The seemingly simple word

“yes” is a good example of this, which is a lesson I learned the hard way. Some, including those from the U.S, interpret “yes” to mean a commitment. The Japanese strongly prefer not to use the word “no” and occasionally, they will use the word “yes” but clearly mean “no”. In Saudi Arabia, the word “yes” can sometimes mean “maybe”. As you can see, the same word may mean different things at different times, in different contexts, depending upon who uses the word and how it is used.



Conclusion:

Multi-national/multi-cultural teams offer significant challenges to management and leadership in today’s global work environment. But few things are as satisfying to build or as powerful to work with as a world-class, high performance work team that can change the world!



J. R. McGee
Managing Partner & CEO

1248 Queen Street, Pottstown PA 19464

www.xstreamlean.com

610-212-6728

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