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ESSENTIALS OF INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT

8 Keys to Success in Business



LEARNING BEST PRACTICES

Working in an international environment can be challenging when teams are diverse, coming from different countries with different languages, from numerous departments with multiple points of view. Personally speaking, diversity should be seen as a resource, a chance to find new solutions and work faster and better. However, cultural diversity can also generate conflicts, if people do not listen to each other and simply argue from their own point of view.

Let us take the example of a US manager, sitting in his office in Boston, who emails a Spanish colleague working in Madrid for the same multinational. He writes: “I would like to have this report by next Tuesday.”

The US manager intends this to be an urgent request for a comprehensive report. However, the Spanish correspondent may understand this as a wish, not a formal request. He or she may not understand the urgency and the importance of the matter. Therefore, when the report is not delivered on time and is only in draft format, this fuels the US manager’s prejudice against the Spaniards as being unprofessional. He phones his Spanish colleague and expresses his frustration. This, in turn, fuels the Spaniard’s prejudice against Americans as being pushy.

In a same-nationality setting, such a misunderstanding would not occur as team members would understand each other. A lot of what we expect of the people we manage is unspoken, it is taken for granted. We do not often voice our performance expectations because we think the other party can understand them without having to express them explicitly. Similar communication patterns, ways of thinking and a common language exist between individuals and teams in a national context.

Managing effectively with input from different cultures is even more challenging than operating exclusively within your own culture! You must make your ideas heard, sometimes going all the way to the very top of the hierarchy to get your projects approved quickly. Do you think you will be able to use common language and appropriate attitudes to get things done?

1.1. Triple challenge

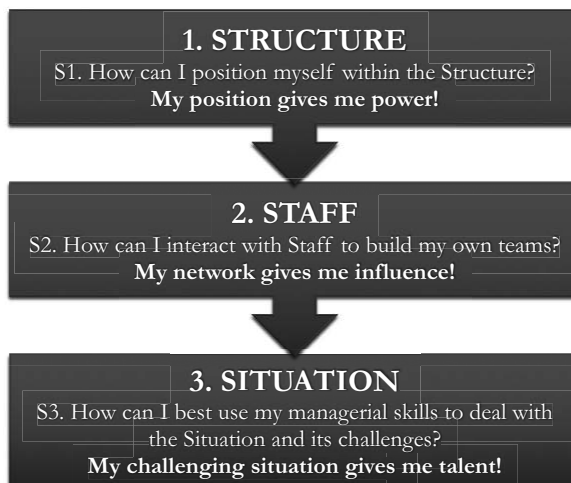
Yes, you may think you will be able to do it, but only if you are aware of three challenges, which I personally name “the triple S”.

S1. Structure awareness is critical. It is the ability to perceive and understand the different components of an organization to find your place in it and to know where you stand. How do we work with the organization? Credibility is earned and not easily acquired.

S2. Staff interaction is essential to the health of your international business. They increase productivity levels and improve job satisfaction. When you trust your teams, you demonstrate openness and sincerity in your thoughts and actions.

S3. Situation analysis allows you to identify challenges, opportunities and threats for your business, and to determine an ambition by looking ahead. Those who develop such visions define strategies to project themselves into the future.

Figure A. The triple S (Structure, Staff, Situation)



This is the overall situation you will be faced with! Credibility has to be earned and does not come easily, as there are subtleties and unwritten rules which newly-appointed managers will be confronted with and will not grasp before some time. This is the so-called “Survival of the fittest!” To prove this point, I will focus on the first main feature of the international environment that you need to be aware of, in order to be able to manage global teams and work effectively across cultures. Some aspects of this characteristic may be familiar to you as it includes many cultural factors.

The first challenge is the complexity of the structure you have to deal with. The international environment is often like a maze where those in positions of power may tend to think in terms of competition, may fail to share power or may supervise closely their subordinates. To start with this first challenge, let us take a look at two of its critical aspects.

1.2. Mentoring relationship

Firstly, I bet you are already familiar with international business and are going to tell me that you can manage, and also that you are smart enough to work things out for yourself, which may well be true; however, you will probably waste a lot of time and energy trying to understand the context, office politics, also deciphering the unwritten rules and learn “best practices”. Secondly, you could also lose your credibility.

Certain rules are explicit and can be found in handbooks, global policies or business processes. They are usually easy to follow, such as courses of action implied by tacit assumptions and expected behaviors. Do you agree with the commonly

accepted image of the master of a ship, expected to be the last to leave his ship in the case of a shipwreck?

If we go back to the notion of business, this would mean, for example, a common procedure among many countries regarding their dispute resolution process. This corporate process would stipulate something along the lines of “If a dispute arises between two parties, they must try to resolve it themselves. However, if the dispute is not resolved within X business days, either party has to notify the issue to the other party in writing. Both parties’ directors shall then meet to attempt to resolve the dispute within X business days, following the notification to the other party.”

In contrast, other rules are clearly implicit as they are unwritten, and have to be figured out by the employees and managers involved. They are usually workplace norms and behaviors that are not formally communicated, but which clearly play a role in managing projects and making things happen. They are the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and actions that are cultural practices, and difficult to decipher for “a newbie”. The unwritten rules range from issues, such as what managers expect from their subordinates, to how colleagues interact with one another. In some countries, autonomy and empathy are not just ideas, but cultural social norms with physical and emotional dimensions. Below is an example, which I have personally experienced, of the possible negative effects of well-known implicit human behaviors:

This happened in an international agency where the French CEO was sharing a “kick-off meeting” for a new project in which I was involved as an external consultant. In his introductory speech, he stated that he would promote open dialogue and critical thinking during the meeting; yet, during that same meeting, when we started to challenge some of his ideas about the project, he immediately contradicted and silenced us!

The French have a good expression: “*Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop,*” which means, if we chase away someone’s natural tendencies, they come back at a gallop, and that is what we saw here. Obviously, “A leopard never changes its spots,” which, here, means that no one can change their innate nature, which may force some managers to say one thing and do another!

So, what do the unwritten rules mean to you? When you start working in a new global position, your direct bosses usually say that they have an open-door policy (ODP). It is true that their doors are almost always open, but their offices are empty! When they are there, they are seldom free for more than a quick exchange in the corridor! This is unfortunate as the purpose of an ODP is to encourage open communication and feedback, minimize assumptions and build meaningful relationships! Referring to the open-door policy, my mentor once told me, “It’s about opening your mind, not just your door!”

To further complicate the issue, divisions and departments within an international organization may have various unwritten rules in the execution of their tasks and duties. Do they favor a bottom-up approach or top-down approach? As one might expect, unwritten rules are heavily influenced by multitasking and interaction, as any working relationship is affected by multiple levels of hierarchy in an international structure.

If you want to be effective in the workplace, you need to know these things, because what you do not know can reduce your effectiveness and damage your business career! You can learn these unwritten rules thanks to observation and experience, which is your first possibility! However, this is time consuming.

A second option is to take action without knowing the true overall context. However, if you do this, you end up discovering that this is to your own detriment, as you have misjudged the scope of the projects at hand or simply misunderstood your bosses’ expectations. As you fail to identify the key players in

your organization, you become aware of your blindness to the bigger picture.

As my mentor once said: “JP (my nickname), you must understand that key players are the backbone of any structure, and identifying them is essential. You can spot them by their tendency to make instant decisions without reporting or referring to their superiors and by the fact that they always speak up in meetings to ask for the next move.”

If you choose either of these first two options, you will understand how difficult it can be for you to repair the damage later. You may think that all you need to do to be successful is to do a good job, as you were led to believe in some business schools, but an organization chart does not explicitly show who the key players are, and you will be left in the dark if you do not address this issue from the start!

The third and best option is to find the people you need! To do this, you need to find a “guide” who can explain the unwritten rules to you, such as the key responsibilities each person assumes, the personalities and influences involved, the nuts and bolts of your position, and how you can work across organizational boundaries. This “guide” is called a “mentor”, a person who can give you the list of dos and don’ts, allowing you to become familiar with your environment, learn “best practices” and adopt effective corporate behavior.

Example of a list of do’s:

- *how to gain subject matter experts’ trust;*
- *communicate effectively;*
- *manage multitasking;*
- *build networks, gain influence;*
- *find partners or integrate cultural differences.*

Example of a list of don'ts:

- *how to avoid unrealistic tasks and risks;*
- *how not to break confidentiality;*
- *how to avoid procrastination and micromanagement;*
- *how not to lose face in international negotiations.*

Someone who can also explain to you what a key player is, and give you a list of key players who could help you make your teams and your projects more efficient and effective. A key player is anyone who has the power to decide whether a project will be carried out, abandoned, postponed or what resources will be devoted to it.

What can I ask my mentor to do for me? Among the roles a mentor can play, is that of a **guide**.

Personally, this is the role I needed the most to achieve my goals! My mentor as a guide could help me establish a framework leading to meaningful success. This consisted of shaping a vision of my future that gave me direction. Ask yourself the following question: What do I want to become? What is my ambition? It is the vision that provides you with a destination and without a destination, you cannot plan your route. You may have a vision of what you want to accomplish in international business, however a mentor will help you articulate and plan it!

Specifying your current mission is also helpful. Every mission statement I formulated with a mentor, indicated what I was capable of doing and how I could be distinctive from others. Ask yourself: What am I able to do? What can I do better than others? What is unique about me? This is your *raison d'être*. Be