How to Create an Effective Global Team

Mark Whitby, former global leader and current NED at Candy Mechanics, speaks to **Mary-Anne Baldwin** about how to make a global team both productive and cohesive

Mark Whitby, NED and founding investor of UK consumer start-up, Candy Mechanics, is a veteran of the tech industry, working for global corporates including Intel, Vodafone and Seagate. At the latter company, his most recent role was Senior Vice President of the Global Consumer Group, where he was responsible for their $2 billion global retail business. Criticaleye spoke to Mark to uncover what it takes to lead a productive and cohesive global team.

What are the benefits of leading a global team?

From a personal point of view, I've really loved the diversity of working internationally and have always travelled – I relish being a global citizen.

Don't Underestimate the Power of Face-to-Face Meetings: Physical meetings not only create trust and forge a stronger relationship but allow you to read the subtext of certain situations.

Form a Communication Strategy: This may include regular physical or Skype meetings, communication forums, newsletters and video messages. Keep it genuine and entertaining.

Make Strategic Secondments: Moving people around allows them to understand other regional operations plus create contacts and allies who can help them when they return home.

Balance Global Standardisation with Local Adaption: Global teams need standardised process and approaches, particularly when it comes to HR. However, regional teams must be able to express them in a manner that suits them.

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On a wider level, the broader the diversity, the wider and richer your team's skills, perspectives and approaches will be. That also helps you understand the operating environment much better. For example, your local team in China will be able to help you understand how approaching the local market must differ from how you do it in the West.

As a global leader, what role must one play in interpreting different regional cultures?

There is a belief that with the same language we can communicate effectively, but it's far more complicated than that. Understanding the reality of a situation versus what you're being told is a hard thing to pick apart and so a large part of my role is to act as a cultural interpreter.

That might mean telling my European team they need to be more constructive about how to give feedback to the US. Or, it could be telling HQ that the positive messages they're hearing from Asia might not be what the team are saying once they've put the phone down.

The ability to quickly create a rapport and break down barriers in a polite way is helpful in allowing you to become an effective global leader. It's a skill rather than a personality type and it can be learnt, but if you have a genuine interest in people and cultures you'll acquire that ability much faster.

A common point of friction is the imbalance of power and resources between teams. How do you create a fair environment in which everyone feels their voice is heard?

There is often a perceived, and quite real, imbalance of power. Having worked in a regional satellite of a global company and a global HQ, I've seen it from both angles. It's the by-product of physical distance, process and management.

As a global leader, you need to create a shared consciousness. Constantly reminding satellite teams about where they are contributing to the strategic objectives and amplify that with the smaller, more remote teams.

A unified, homogenous global team might be the dream, but can it ever be a reality?

No matter your desire to create a flat, equal structure, you can't always get there because some entities like having an element of autonomy – and it can work well like that.

Vodafone grew through acquisition, many of which came with binding agreements that the acquired division >

could continue to work in a very autonomous way. Because of that, the operating businesses didn't feel disenfranchised by HQ and would actually sometimes disregard them.

Part of the fun of working at a satellite office is saying 'ignore HQ, we're doing it our way'. It can sometimes be better to ask forgiveness than permission.

Has technology changed the way you lead your global team?

There is a belief that technology can help shortcut problems. In reality, technology is a facilitator but it can't replace the richness of face-to-face communication and body language.

Despite all of the cultural variances, when you boil it down, people want the same fundamental elements of job security, recognition and insight into the future. You can unite people on those commonalities, but it's very > difficult to find out what makes an individual tick – to find out about their family, their home-life – without meeting them in person.

How do you balance the need to be physically present with the demands of the role?

Every experience I've had has taught me the need to be physically present among the team. Especially as a new global leader you need to be out in those first 90 days meeting people. It's incredible how many of my predecessors didn't do that.

That does have a limited lifespan though. You can't keep going back or you risk your own home life, as well as getting other elements of the job done, such as

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sharing those findings with the senior team and delivering on them. That means creating a wider communication strategy to support your efforts.

What advice would you give on creating the right communication strategy?

I had the benefit of coaching from General Stan McChrystal and his colleagues who were tasked with aligning 8,000 people during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The army's enemy and environment had changed so it had to adapt its command and control style by using technology to make agile, local decisions.

The General pushed me to deliver weekly communication as close to the individual as possible, so I started filming and emailing a three-minute weekly video from my phone. At first I thought it was a disaster but as I travelled around in the weeks after, I realised people were acting like they knew me. The internal comms team wanted to make it more polished and professional but I wouldn't let them near it; the point was that it feels genuine.

How did you create meaningful two-way communication flows?

Yes, creating effective outbound communication is one thing but you've got to have processes and opportunities for that communication to run both ways.

Direct reports often won't give you the honest truth, and that's not because they're trying to hoodwink you but because everyone filters what they say. Communication forums are a great way for people to have open dialogue with different parts of the organisation.

I held monthly communication forums, which included three or four layers of the management team together on a call. That allowed senior management to hear feedback and role model that kind of conversation. The forum became the right place to get stuff done, rather than airing discord around the coffee machine. ■

Mark Whitby
NED
Candy Mechanics

Mark is currently a NED and founding investor of a UK consumer start-up business, Candy Mechanics.

Throughout his career Mark has led regional and global teams, and delivered significant growth and change.

His previous roles include SVP, Global Consumer Group and VP EMEA Sales and Marketing at Seagate; Director of Global Data Channels in Group Business Marketing at Vodafone and European Channel Marketing Organisation at Intel.

Contact Mark through:
www.criticaleye.com