Inclusion in Virtual Teams

JUDITH H. KATZ, Executive Vice President, The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group Inc.

By JUDITH H. KATZ, Executive Vice President, The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group Inc [1].

Global reach and presence have brought entirely new dynamics to the workplace. Most meetings now happen virtually on some level, with at least some of the participants taking part from remote locations. On top of that, organizations that operate across several regions grapple continually with differences in language and culture, as well as with efficient collaboration across multiple time zones. How do you include everyone in meetings with such logistical challenges?

Finding a solution to this question is not optional. If anything, inclusion — when used as a how for higher performance — is more necessary during these times of rapid change and virtual global teams. Taking effective steps to including everyone in a virtual meeting eliminates the waste that occurs when people cannot hear one another, misunderstand one another's meanings, or simply do not offer their "street corners" (perspectives) because they feel excluded from the process.

Technology is often touted as the solution to this issue. We have Skype, we have instant messaging, we have online workspaces. These technologies will make global collaboration and remote conversations seamless. Yet technology by itself is not the answer, as the following scenarios make clear:

1. People on a teleconference can see one another but still may not know one another. Without some basic information on each person's title, position,

and relevance to the situation at hand, people do not know how to partner with the others in the meeting to do their best collective work.
2. An individual dashes off a quick email, complete with jargon and slang, to someone whose first language is different from that of the writer. As a result, the recipient does not comprehend the message.
3. A regularly scheduled conference call, scheduled during the workday for those at “corporate,” requires team members halfway around the world to be on the call at 3:00 a.m.
4. People on speakerphone are not asked to contribute until the very end of the meeting, usually with “Does anyone on the phone have anything to add?”
5. People whose first language is not the language of the meeting may get “run over” by the fast pace of the conversation.

In these cases and many others, opportunities to connect, communicate or collaborate are missed, and this “miss” creates waste. An ill-conceived email requires additional communication to clarify the misunderstanding. Meetings in which people are not given the best conditions for contributing can easily lead to suboptimal outcomes, requiring additional meetings to obtain the needed results.

The key is not technology alone. It is our ability to use the technology in an inclusive manner — a manner that enables people to bring their best selves and do their best work. Following are a few strategies for meeting conveners to consider:

1. Whether the team functions virtually or face-to-face, it is critical for team members to get to know one another and develop trust and understanding. This has to be the first step before diving into a task; do not assume that “everyone already knows each other.” Time must be set aside to “meet” and get acquainted.
2. Send out the agenda (with pre-reads and preparation exercises) at least one day before the meeting. Among other advantages, this gives people whose first language is not the dominant language time to digest the materials and think about their responses.
3. For recurring meetings with a global membership, vary the meeting times to accommodate team members in different time zones. Doing so reinforces the message that everyone on the team is valued. This strategy is critical even if only one or two group members are in a different time zone: all too often they must continually adjust their schedules to meet the demands of the “majority.” It is not uncommon, for example, for U.S.-based companies to find their Asian counterparts working a full day and then having a full evening of conference calls with “corporate” every night of the week.
4. At the beginning of the meeting, clearly state the purpose and make introductions. Saying hellos or posing a quick open-ended question makes people feel seen as valuable participants; introductions help people determine who is speaking from which street corner and how they might collaborate to do their best work. If members already know one another, a brief check enables everyone to get her or his voice into the conversation early and gives all team members a sense of their colleagues’ frame of

mind.

5. Periodically throughout the meeting, invite people who have not spoken to speak up—particularly those joining the meeting from a remote location. Alternatively, when asking questions, ask people on the phone to respond first.
6. Assign different people to facilitate different topics to assure more evenly distributed engagement.
7. If people are from different countries and speak different languages, provide everyone with information in advance of the meeting so they can prepare. During the meeting, pause for responses and allow time for people to process, comprehend, and respond.
8. Encourage people to announce when they join or leave a meeting or call.
9. Eliminate side conversations and multitasking, which often exclude people who are not physically present in the room. Require full engagement of all members.
10. Ask all people, whether in a conference room or on the phone, to state their names when speaking, as it is often difficult to recognize voices unless a team has been together for a long time.
11. If some of the people are in a room together, ask one person to restate any comments made in the room to ensure that those on the call have heard.
12. Put name cards or photos of the remote participants in the meeting room as a reminder of who is participating via phone.
13. Limit virtual meetings to two hours at most. Many people find it very difficult to stay engaged beyond that time.

Are some technologies better than others? Yes, but it depends on the meeting format and the needs of the participants. A chat function, for instance, can be helpful to anyone who has trouble hearing. Some online tools enable people to raise their hands, take a vote, and display emoticons (e.g., smiley faces) to react to what others have said. Videoconferencing adds the dimension of nonverbal communication—gestures, facial expressions, body language—while requiring people to pay closer attention to their interactions and the others in the meeting. Online (or phone) breakout rooms provide additional opportunities for more people to make their voice heard in smaller groups. And sometimes it might be better to have everyone call in to the conversation, with no two people on the same phone.

Most technologies for the global workplace are still in their infancy. So are our skills in using them effectively. And we know that technology alone can’t solve all the issues of human interaction. For that reason, using inclusive behaviors and meeting norms in virtual environments is particularly important. Doing so can make people feel more valued, embolden them to share their street corners, enhance the quality of interactions, eliminate waste and lead to greater team collaboration and organizational performance.

What’s your take? Please feel free to comment below! For more information, please visit www.kjcg.com *[1].*

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