

CEP Magazine – December 2021 Strategies for enhanced global teambuilding

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Spread across multiple continents and time zones, multinational teams lack the daily benefit of routine proximity to their coworkers, so they have learned over the years what works.

Strategies for overcoming the distance

I had the pleasure of speaking with several of our compliance colleagues regarding their strategies and tips on how they keep their global teams working cohesively and effectively, no matter the distance. Here is some of their wisdom and experience.

Focus on outcomes rather than activity

“Clearly defined goals and deadlines” are crucial, according to Greg Brower, chief global compliance officer at Wynn Resorts. By focusing on results, your team will cultivate a culture of meritocracy and reduce the politics that can ensue when activity is rewarded instead of outcomes (like simple reliance on face-to-face meetings or frequent emails that ultimately are not value-added).

Establish a robust and multi-faceted communications strategy

Michael Ortwein, assistant general counsel & chief compliance officer at General Motors, creates regular settings for his global team to convene for substantive discussion, and alternates these meetings with informal, non-work-related conversations among the team. “I have found that we all feel more connected as a team when we know more about each other as individuals, and that is very hard to accomplish in a virtual setting in the middle of a pandemic if you aren’t deliberate about creating those opportunities.” What does this look like on Michael’s calendar? Monthly global team meetings as well as informal, voluntary monthly virtual coffees. “I really look forward to these meetings every month,” he said.

Angela Main, global chief compliance officer & associate general counsel, Asia Pacific at Zimmer Biomet, agreed. During the pandemic, her team “upped their game,” increasing the number of department town hall meetings to ensure that company-wide information was shared in a timely manner, team achievements were recognized, and updates were shared from compliance peers in other regions. They introduced virtual coffee chats with about eight people at a time around the globe, which has brought the team closer—team members discussed coping mechanisms; shared personal stories; and introduced partners, kids, and pets. Other strategies included launching a guest speaker series with visitors from other departments and external speakers, and increasing the quarterly team newsletters to monthly (and including more personal “get to know you” articles). Lastly, Main

dropped in on her direct report meetings to be more available to answer any “burning questions they had on their minds.”

Hold regular one-on-one meetings with your direct reports

This management best practice has always been important, but leading a geographically dispersed team makes regular, personal communication even more critical. Most of my global clients used to host global compliance team meetings at least annually, and chief compliance officers would schedule regular visits to their team members around the globe. Now, chief compliance officers are supplementing with virtual meetings. Victoria McKenney, deputy general counsel – regulatory and compliance and deputy chief compliance officer of United States Steel, believes that checking in—often—is a great tool. She points out that even with her on-site team, “we’ve lost the ability to run into our team members when getting a cup of coffee or passing each other in the hallway, so as managers, we need to be more deliberate about making sure our team members feel supported.” Brower added, “Just simply communicating throughout the day is important.”

Camera on or off?

Since the pandemic, video chat has become a bit more tricky. Video fatigue is real, and not everyone has a private home office. Prior to the pandemic, team meetings and one-on-ones were “camera on.” As McKenney reflected, as a leader “it’s helpful to give your full attention to whoever is speaking. People see when we are distracted, and that could lead to someone feeling a lack of respect.”

Similarly, Ali Hawthorne, global chief ethics and compliance officer at Boehringer Ingelheim, advocated camera on. “The visual allows you to demonstrate that you are listening and convey highly communicative physical cues, like head nodding or even taking a silent moment to digest a comment, which might otherwise lead others to believe you’ve dropped off the line.” She added, “But set boundaries too. I just heard about someone connecting by video from a hospital bed. Nobody needs that!”

Some leaders have taken a more empathetic, modified approach during the pandemic. For group meetings, many chief compliance officers allow team members to choose whether to have the camera on or off. However, for critical one-on-one meetings such as performance conversations, Faith Myers, global privacy & compliance officer at McKesson, believes these must be on camera. I wholeheartedly agree. When remote, and especially under extenuating circumstances such as we’ve experienced over the pandemic, important discussions should always take place in person or the next best—on camera. Eye contact inspires trust, video enables important microexpressions in body language to be viewed by both parties, and you can course-correct more easily when necessary by tuning in to these important signals for career-affecting moments.

Provide your team with regular performance feedback and individualized support

“Mutually schedule the call so that your team member feels some level of control and picking a time when they’re in the right frame of mind to process feedback,” Main recommended. She also suggested using an agenda to help both sides be prepared for what they are going to discuss so it can be more productive. “And the manager must ask, ‘How can I help?’ and really listen to the response and do what they can to provide that support or explain genuinely why certain requests cannot be met.”

Set team norms around working hours and technology use

With a global team, this can be one of the trickiest areas to manage, because someone somewhere is working at any given time. The tough reality on a global team is that taking early and late calls is part of the job. On the plus

side, digital collaboration platforms can produce excellent project outcomes, 100% virtually, asynchronously and quickly, shared Hawthorne. But she has also experienced the lack of focus that can result from constantly reacting to technology distractions. It's important for all team members to "digitally detox" from time to time, she explained. She uses the "do not disturb" feature on her messaging platform when she needs to fully concentrate on a task.

For many executives, weekends are used to catch up on work emails. Ortwein shared, "In the past, I would often tell email recipients that a response is not required over the weekend, but even the act of receiving the email may unnecessarily disrupt work/life balance. One easy practice I've adopted is to send any weekend emails on a delayed delivery so that they don't arrive until Monday morning." Myers and Main agreed, often storing emails for Monday. Main set the rule "not to send emails over the weekend. Store them until Monday, if you really want to work yourself, so that it takes the pressure off the person to respond immediately." Brower said he never communicates with a team member on a day off or weekend unless it's absolutely necessary, "which it almost never is."

Err on the side of politeness

It's always wise to be diplomatic, even with people you don't understand or naturally get along with. Across cultures, Main has observed that brusque communications (verbal or electronic) can damage relationships. With no in-person time, it is so important to display basic courtesy and cultural awareness. Not doing so can rupture a relationship and sometimes the whole team dynamic. As she's discovered, "It is interesting how difficult it can be to get people to modify their habits because they just cannot comprehend or relate to the impact they have on the recipient."

Recognizing this, many teams have engaged me over the past year to facilitate teambuilding workshops that assess and share each team member's work styles and preferences. Doing so can increase trust, reduce unproductive conflict, lead to easier and more fun working relationships, and accelerate the accomplishment of business results.

Ensure fair access to information and manage potential proximity bias

Myers emphasized the importance of scheduling meetings during the regular business day for everyone, regardless of time zone, whenever possible. "And if that's not possible, then the meetings should be rotated so that the same times are not always at a disadvantage." Brower schedules regular virtual meetings with far-flung team members in an effort to balance things out with those who are at a home office. "That way, I am not just meeting with those team members who are more likely to just virtually drop by unannounced or seek me out."

These leaders are managing what is known as proximity bias, or the human inclination to prefer people who have the most frequent contact with you—those you are likeliest to forge the strongest relationships with. It's a home advantage. In-person contact enables local staff to build relationships and have easy access to critical business information, which often results in an advantage in compensation or promotion decisions.

On the positive side, McKenney finds the virtual setting has done a great deal to reduce the potential for proximity bias. "It no longer matters where your office is or who you sit next to at meetings. Now you are more likely than ever to get to know others outside of your close proximity, and everyone has the ability to forge relationships across all sorts of geographical lines."

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