

Language, Culture, Status, and Identity: Understanding Factors that Encourage or Limit Global Team Participation

Jennifer L. Gibbs

Rutgers University

Yana V. Grushina

University of Western Australia

Cristina B. Gibson

University of Western Australia

Patrick D. Dunlop

University of Western Australia

John Cordery

University of Western Australia

jgibbs@rutgers.edu

Abstract

A key challenge facing global organisations lies in balancing organisationally and culturally derived power dynamics to elicit participation and input from all sites. This paper draws on a mixed-method analysis of field data from a total of 27 conference calls and 48 interviews with nine global teams at a global minerals and mining company based in the United States and operating in Australia, Brazil, Jamaica, Spain, Suriname, and the U.S. to examine the factors inhibiting global team participation. An analysis of representation and participation in conference calls finds that calls are dominated by leaders and members at the Australian site (who comprise 65 percent of the turns at talk), which was the richest in resources and the most dominant politically. Interview analysis reveals that this inequality was due to language and cultural factors as well as organisational power dynamics among the team locations. Implications of these findings for global teams are discussed.

Keyword: Organisational Communication

Introduction

A key challenge facing global organisations lies in balancing organisational and cultural power dynamics to elicit participation and input from all sites. Multinational corporations and other types of global organisations often set up global teams to span various country locations and serve as mechanisms for sharing knowledge and coordinating work across geographical and cultural boundaries (Cordery et al., 2009). Global teams constitute an important coordination mechanism for global organisations, as their geographical dispersion provides access to distributed expertise and their dynamic structure enables creative and flexible responses, increasing the potential for innovation (Gibson and Gibbs, 2006).

Simply bringing organisational members together virtually from different locations does not ensure that expertise and input from these sites will be represented and shared, however.

Research on global teams finds that they are often fragmented by geographical and cultural faultlines (Cramton and Hinds, 2005; O’Leary and Mortensen, 2010) and that, furthermore, power dynamics often arise among sites in which the knowledge and perspectives of one location (usually the headquarters site) are privileged while the knowledge and perspectives of other locations are discounted (Levina and Vaast, 2008; Metiu, 2006). Communication and knowledge sharing across sites are likely to be imbalanced due to a variety of factors such as language barriers, cultural differences in level of assertiveness versus deference to authority, and status differences and identities associated with geographical or functional subgroups. Although these challenges are often acknowledged generally, studies rarely compare the role of multiple factors to parse out the impact of each and how they shape the micro communication practices of global team members. We address the following research question: what cultural and organisational

factors shape global team interaction? We draw on a qualitative analysis of data from interviews and conference calls with nine global teams in a multinational organisation to answer this question.

Literature Review

Global Team Participation

Global teams, which span multiple countries, cultures, geographical locations and time zones (Gibbs and Boyraz, in press), are often established in multinational corporations to enhance knowledge sharing and integration across company locations (Gluesing and Gibson, 2004). The exchange of diverse perspectives and information among global team members has been found to improve team and organisational performance through the generation of higher quality solutions and outcomes (Cummings, 2004; Stahl et al., 2010). Information and communication technologies (ICTs) hold great promise for accessing group knowledge that transcends small, local groups and personal networks, and for using it to improve decision-making processes (Foote et al., 2002).

Knowledge sharing in global teams is likely to be hindered by challenges in securing input and participation from all sites, however, for several reasons. First, language barriers make it more difficult for non-native speakers to speak up and contribute to team discussions (Dube and Pare, 2001). Second, cultural differences in communication styles may result in members from certain cultures being more dominant and assertive, while members from other cultures are more hesitant and quiet (Zakaria et al., 2004). Third, power dynamics may result in the knowledge and perspectives of higher-status locations being privileged, while knowledge and perspectives from

lower-status locations are discounted (Metiu, 2006). Finally, geographical and cultural faultlines may emerge that engender strong divisive identities that create rifts within the team and limit knowledge sharing and participation across subgroups (Cramton and Hinds, 2005). It is likely that these various explanatory factors may work in tandem to exacerbate divisions within global teams and lead to unequal participation, but prior research has not yet compared multiple explanations and their relative influence on global team participation. In order to further unpack these potential influences, we will now review relevant research on the role of language and cultural factors, power dynamics, and faultlines in global, multicultural, and virtual teams.

Impacts of Language and Culture on Participation

Language and cultural differences are likely to complicate participation in global teams. While English is the de facto language for most mixed-language global teams, degrees of language proficiency are likely to vary across countries, such that non-native speakers are at a disadvantage with both oral and written communication. This may be particularly pronounced in teleconferences or other synchronous meetings, in which it is difficult for members who are not fluent in the language to fully participate (Dube and Pare, 2001). Language has been found to play a key role in the cultural orientations of individuals (Ayyash-Abdo, 2001) and native and non-native English speakers have been found to have culture-based differences in discourse preferences and formats (Ulijn et al., 2000). Despite the importance of language differences in shaping global team participation, English language variance within the global business

community and its implications for global virtual teams have been under-studied and often downplayed (Bloch and Starks, 1999).

Beyond language, cultural differences among team members are also likely to produce varying levels of team participation, due to different cultural values and communication styles. For instance, team members from low context cultures (Hall, 1966) are likely to value clear, open communication and adopt direct communication styles that may be perceived as confrontational to members from high context cultures, who may prefer more indirect and implicit communication styles to save face and avoid conflict (Zakaria et al., 2004). Conflict styles have also been related to the cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 2001).

According to face-negotiation theory, face is an explanatory mechanism that influences conflict styles across cultures. Individualistic cultures are more likely to be concerned with self-face (preserving their own image), while collectivistic cultures are more concerned with other-face (preserving the image of others) or mutual face preservation. Self-face has been found to be positively related to dominating conflict styles, while other-face was associated with avoiding and integrating styles (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003). These cultural differences are likely to influence the participation of global team members in that, due to differences in high-context/low context cultural orientations, some members are more assertive and dominant in meetings as they strive for clarity, while others are more evasive or hesitant to speak up out of concern for face saving and group harmony.

Impacts of Faultlines and Power Dynamics on Participation

In addition to language and culture, status differences and faultlines often arise within global teams that may limit participation and contribution across sites. Cultural or geographical differences are likely to create faultlines or rifts within global teams between strong subgroups that arise (Cramton and Hinds, 2005; Earley and Mosakowski, 2000; Gibson and Vermeulen, 2003; Lau and Murnighan, 1998). The existence of these cultural or geographical subgroups is likely to trigger social categorisation processes in the form of in-group / out-group distinctions (Cramton, 2001; O’Leary and Mortensen, 2010) that can lead to team conflict and biased information sharing, as they activate in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Erturk and Peña, 2012). Such divisions within global teams may limit communication and information sharing across locations and cultures.

In addition to being fragmented by faultlines, power dynamics often arise within global teams in which certain locations (usually the headquarters site) are more dominant and central in decision-making, while remote locations are excluded, often inadvertently. For instance, Metiu’s (2006) ethnographic study of a global software team distributed between the United States and India found that status differences aligned with geographic distance to reinforce the U.S. group as high-status and the India group as low-status, which negatively impacted perceptions of the low-status group and hindered cooperation among the subgroups. Other research on global outsourcing teams has found that they are often fragmented by multiple national and organisational boundaries, which leads to an imbalance of resources among onshore and offshore contributors. This hinders collaboration among locations and results in offshore contributors being considered as of lower status than onshore participants (Levina and Vaast, 2008). Similarly, Gibbs (2009) found that the communication practices of members of a global

outsourcing team were enabling for managers onshore, but resulted in marginalising foreign assignees from the offshore software centres, such that status differences arose that privileged the onshore (headquarters) site. These findings suggest that global team participation may be fragmented due to faultlines and power dynamics among locations, and that geographical and cultural differences often work in tandem to produce status differences that may hinder participation.

Methods

In this study, we analyse global teams at a global minerals and mining company headquartered in the United States and operating in Australia, Brazil, Jamaica, Spain, Suriname, and the U.S. Our analysis draws primarily on rich qualitative field data consisting of (1) observation and recording of team conference calls and (2) interviews with global team members. The analysis for this study was conducted on a subset of teams for which both interview and conference call data was available; specifically, we analysed nine teams, whose work was observed via 27 conference calls. Forty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with members of these teams; further, face-to-face interactions were observed at several events. The sample is drawn from a larger study that included 76 interviews across 13 global teams. See Table 1 for a description of the teams in this sample.

Conference Calls

Conference calls represented the primary mode for team members to interact as a group; the calls were intended to take place regularly (i.e., bi-monthly), with members from each of the nine plant locations across the countries of Australia, the U.S., Brazil, Jamaica, Suriname and Spain

expected to attend. That is, the organisation encouraged team members in each of these countries to attend all calls, although that did not always eventuate. All conference calls held by the organisation's global teams from November 2011 to November 2012 were recorded. A total of nine teams held conference calls over the course of the year. Of 50 scheduled calls, 27 took place; the other 22 calls were either cancelled, rescheduled, or did not take place due to the absence of the team leader who must initiate a call. Each of the nine teams had at least one conference call, such that non-occurrences were relatively evenly distributed across teams. The different number of calls held for each team reflects preferences in scheduling by the team leaders as well as call non-occurrences. The numbers presented in Table 1 reflect the actual frequency of all calls that have taken place. Conference calls were observed and recorded; the average duration of a call was 50 minutes, and average transcript length was 42 pages, for a total of 1,134 double-spaced pages of text that was entered into Atlas.ti for analysis.

The number of participants on the call out of the total number of team members, the plant and country locations represented, the location of the team leader (who led the calls), and the duration of the call were noted for each conference call. Whereas these call descriptors provided useful data for establishing objective trends in participation by region, we further analysed the transcripts for turns at talk taken by the team leader and each participant on the call. Turns at talk are "identifiable components or units, ... including single words, single clauses of phrases, single sentences, or any combination of these" (Drew, 2005: 80). In this way, turns at talk are the building blocks of interaction. The number of times each location's representative speaks on a given call represents one clear way to make visible differences in interaction. The turns at talk were converted into percentages in order to clearly represent allocations of speaking turns during

the calls. This analysis does not reflect the length of each turn at talk, but still it provides a meaningful measure of the level of participation. The validity of this measure of quantity of participation by location was also verified using an alternative method for measuring contribution levels. To do this, a line count of each person's contribution was conducted on a random subset of transcripts, confirming the proportions revealed by the turns at talk measure.

Interviews

Team members from each of the company locations were represented across the interview sample of 48 people used in this analysis. Interviews were conducted in English. The interview sample is characterised by representative diversity of nationality, age, tenure at company, and length as well as type of team participation (member versus leader). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti. The average interview length was 49 minutes, with an average transcript length of 38 pages, resulting in 1,824 double-spaced pages. The initial open coding procedure identified any references made by team members to conference call participation. Additionally, any comments related to culture or region-based differences were coded accordingly. The broader code categories were then subdivided as several themes began to emerge; these included 1) language and culture, and 2) power and identity. Next, we discuss the findings of conference call and interview analyses.

Findings

Conference Call Participation

Analysis of conference call data revealed distinct differences in attendance across locations, which are summarised in Table 2. The numbers represent averages for all available calls for each

team. Table 2 demonstrates that Australia was represented on 100 percent of all calls. Brazil was represented on 100 percent of all calls except for Team A, where Brazil was represented 60 percent of the time, and Brazil was not represented at all on calls of Team I. Jamaica participated about 70 percent of the time across all teams. While Spain was represented in some teams, it was not represented at all in several others, and it was represented only some of the time in another third of the teams. Suriname's attendance was akin to Spain's and was sporadic. The U.S. attended 100 percent of the time on the calls of three teams, but was not represented at all on another four of the teams.

The pie chart in Figure 1 illustrates the differences between average percentages of turns at talk among the teams. It is worth noting that the team leader had by far the largest share of the talk turns, speaking on average about 40 percent of the time. Further, seven of the leaders were Australian, one was American, and one was Brazilian. Table 2 illustrates that the latter two team leaders actually brought down the overall talk turn average of all the leaders. Combined with the high percentage of talk turns by other Australians in a call, Australian team members clearly talked for the vast majority of the time in all teams and in most calls. Brazil was the next most vocal group of participants, with Brazilian team members speaking on average 14 percent of the time. The U.S. members were not too far behind, whereas Jamaican, Surinamese, and Spanish team members were the least vocal on the calls, with between 3 and 4.5 percent of turns at talk. Possible reasons for these differences are illuminated by the interview data, which will be discussed next.

Interview Findings

Analysis of interview data yielded two distinct but overlapping categories of factors that influenced global team participation: 1) language and culture; and 2) power and identity.

Language and Cultural Barriers to Participation. At least part of the difference in call participation can be attributed to language and cultural factors. Native English speakers participated most frequently on the calls. They complained that the non-native speakers were hard to hear and understand, and the non-native speakers also reported difficulties understanding the Australian accent. As an Australian team leader acknowledged, “language issues would make it hard if ... English isn’t their first language.” Another commented:

“It’s definitely quite a significant issue, you know, to have people with English as a foreign language on the telephone and it’s very difficult for us in Australia to say what we want to say and it’s clear and slow enough they should ... they will be able to understand and it’s also very difficult to know whether or not they’re understanding it to adjust as you go along or, you know, if you’re not careful all you’ve got is silence at the other end of the line and there’s no feedback...”

A Brazilian member acknowledged the language barrier and felt that the lack of understanding went both ways: “That’s a problem that was realised and also sometimes it’s fairly hard to understand Australians, their accents, the Australian accent.” The language barrier was also an issue for team members from Spain and Suriname, who seemed to feel more disconnected from the other locations, perhaps because their native languages were not shared by the other sites. However, participation was also quite low for the English-speaking Jamaicans, and much higher for the Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, implying that language does not fully explain participation differences.

Participation levels were also influenced by cultural differences in communication style.

Coinciding with being low context and self-face saving (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003; Zakaria

et al., 2004), members from Anglo cultures (Australians and Americans) tended to be more culturally direct and comfortable speaking up and expressing their points of view, and to expect that all members should participate by contributing ideas and opinions. For example, one Australian team member noted that “Australians are very direct, very forthright. They speak their mind. That sort of thing, and that works fine here. We argue with each other usually with no ill feeling generated as a result.” Another Australian team member, who had experience living and working in Brazil for a number of years, contrasted the culture and language differences between the two cultures:

“It’s an interesting culture and you’ve got to, got to get your head around those challenges... They’re a bit indirect as opposed to confronting. .. And, that’s really diametrically opposed to Australians who are direct and will iterate either at this level or that level in order to make the system better, whereas the Brazilians tend to think in a linear fashion, and all the interactions are indirect and very hierarchical in nature. So they will argue with each other but only [at] a certain level, whereas Australians will argue with anybody in the organisation.”

Australians were contrasted as being more direct and confrontational compared to Brazilians, who tended to be more indirect. The Jamaicans were culturally similar in their indirectness and emphasis on harmony, but perhaps for different reasons. This also limited their contributions in calls. Another Australian member said:

“Yeah, the Jamaicans are a lot different again. A little bit indirect... it is a ‘yes’ culture. They do not like to disappoint, so you’ll get, ‘yes.’ And the answer is ‘no, and it’s coming tomorrow’ when the activity hasn’t even started and this sort of thing is very frustrating.”

This indirectness seemed to stem not from politeness but from the power orientation of Jamaican culture, which stifled expression and also took form in a mandate to participate in conference calls by their local managers. Some Jamaican members felt these elements of perceived control made them feel “assessed” and “knowing that we should [participate]”. As one Jamaican member stated:

“All right, I would say it was, it was more or less communicated to me as a requirement. Yeah, so you are more or less required to participate. You are required to participate in the conference calls, you are required to be a part of the community.”

No other cultural group expressed this feeling of participation as mandated. This mandated participation was a type of participatory paradox (Stohl and Cheney, 2001) that actually undermined contribution, as many Jamaican team members were recalcitrant or reluctant to speak up in calls, as a counter reaction to such an overt assertion of power from upper management. Jamaican team members also communicated that they saw the team as a resource, a place where supervisors told them to obtain information – as opposed to a place where knowledge was mutually and equally shared – and did not seem to realise their contributions might be valued. In this way, the general lack of individual agency ingrained in Jamaican culture became perpetuated and reinforced through communication, resulting in a lack of active participation that is the expectation of cultures where proactivity is encouraged.

In sum, language barriers and cultural differences in communication directness and deference to hierarchy worked to limit participation in calls by team members in Brazil, Jamaica, Spain, and Suriname, while Australian and American team members were more vocal and likely to speak up in meetings.

Power and Identity Barriers to Participation.

Interview data also revealed strong status differences and distinct identities among team members from different plants, and these coincided with plant performance based on operating efficiency data we obtained from the organisation. Among the highest performing plants there was an awareness of the overarching mission of the teams and of the opportunity to contribute

and “help” the other sites, which, while well-intentioned, often masked power dynamics among them. As one member of a high-performing plant put it, “we have pockets of excellence, and then there are pockets of opportunity.” The prevailing perspective at that location was succinctly reflected in this distinction between “pockets of excellence” and “pockets of opportunity”, with the former being a reference to the higher-performing sites, and the latter being a reference to other sites. This tongue-in-cheek reference was made by several members of the high-performing plants, audibly, in the company of others – and likewise repeated across sites during face-to-face events. The particular and open reference to the poor-performing plant as a “pocket of opportunity” clearly distinguished it as of lesser status than the “pockets of excellence” represented by the highest-performing plants. In this view, one side was the one being helped or rescued, while the other was doing the helping, providing the excellence.

The members at the high-performing plants expressed opposing points of view regarding their own status as a “power” location – some acknowledged it reflexively, while others rejected the notion altogether while implicitly reinforcing it. For instance, one member discounted the idea that there were status differences, while in the same breath referring to the people on his floor as “the important people”: “Well, for the call agenda, John would just ask the people on his floor, the important people. ... No, I don’t think there is any power difference. Not at all.”

This confidence and self-efficacy to decide for themselves what was best, combined with the sense that they were tasked with helping other plants, was at the opposite end of the spectrum from the view at the poorer-performing sites, which was characterised by feelings of oppression

by the local management, keen awareness of local bureaucracy and pervasive status inequalities in every realm of life. For example, one team member described:

“The culture of where we live here is very corrupted amongst individuals. In terms of telling the truth, in terms of transparency of information and also, we don’t get to interact with top level management, there’s a segregation amongst the rebel force. You understand what I mean?”

This authoritarianism worked with the organisational power dynamics to further disenfranchise team members and enforce their perception of drawing value from the team rather than contributing to it. This worked to discourage eagerness to engage as an individual:

“Alright, what I am going to say is that I am at a disadvantage in the sense that because I am new ... well, yeah, because I’m new to the system I haven’t had much conference calls, and separate and apart from that what I normally do is sit in on the calls, you know. Like we come together as a group and we participate as a group rather than me individually.”

On the other hand, members at the moderately performing plants expressed a sense of vitality and excitement about participating in the team, about sharing knowledge with other plants. Whereas they did not necessarily see themselves as the “saviours” of the pockets of opportunity, neither did they see themselves as representing such pockets themselves. One team member commented, “I really like to participate in this community. In this case, you feel included in a part of the global company.” Overall, they expressed eagerness to share knowledge, to learn as well as contribute. Team members from the lower-performing sites, on the other hand, felt more isolated due to the remoteness of their locations. As a team member stated, “We are separate here, far away from everyone, but I like the community. It is very busy, and my English is not very good often, but I try to listen, to learn.” The lowest performing plant had been undergoing more structural and human resources changes than any other location. Because of increased local turmoil, participation there was quite low, which, in the words of some members, was atypical.

Four distinct themes emerged from the interview data regarding power and identity. A strong sense of self-efficacy and empowerment (over all locations) was conveyed by members from the high-performing plants in their talk of themselves and others. On the other hand, a relatively strong feeling of powerlessness and inability to contribute, even in the face of supervisory pressure to “participate”, was expressed by those at the low-performing plants. Those at the moderately performing sites, while maintaining a sense of their own identity, expressed great interest in engaging with other plant locations, in learning but also in sharing knowledge. The other locations can be viewed as being relative “outsiders” from the “main” activity hubs. This feeling of being on the fringe was communicated by members in interviews and also evident in sporadic conference call participation. As much as if not more than the language and cultural factors affecting team participation, power dynamics and identity orientations created conditions that empowered certain locations and disempowered others.

Discussion

Our findings provide important theoretical implications for research on knowledge sharing and participation in global teams and global organisations more broadly. Our analysis of participation in conference calls demonstrated that calls were dominated by English speakers (mainly Australians), who were more culturally direct and assertive, and who felt more empowered by the organisational status dynamics among sites. Leaders and team members from the Australian locations contributed nearly two-thirds of the turn-taking on conference calls. Our analysis of in-depth interviews revealed several explanations for these differences, which varied across locations. While language barriers primarily hindered participation for Brazil, Spain, and Suriname, Jamaica’s participation was much more limited by cultural and organisational factors

that led to strong feelings of disempowerment among employees. The relative size, resources, and remoteness of the location also played a role in the limited participation of team members from the United States, Spain, and Suriname.

Despite these differences, our findings suggest that language and cultural differences were often intertwined with and exacerbated by the power and status differences among sites, which worked together to limit participation. For instance, the Australian cultural tendency to be direct and strive for clear communication, combined with the relatively high performance of many refineries in Australia, reflected a subtle bias in the assumption that their role was to lead and provide direction to other locations, rather than seeking to understand or learn from them. In this way power differences were perpetuated on a micro level through linguistic and cultural interactions, as well as on a more macro level through organisational status differences and identities. These findings reinforce the ways in which power dynamics are constituted through communicative interactions, and the interplay between situated interactions and the identities that create and are created by them in a process of structuration (Scott et al., 1998). The findings also imply that culture is not neutral, but carries powerful signals regarding one's relative influence and role in the group that are reinforced through communication. Similarly, meetings can be seen as communicative spaces in which cultural and organisational power dynamics are visible through turn-taking and patterns of interaction.

Our findings also provide practical implications for managers of global teams and other work arrangements, suggesting that communication patterns and strategies play an important role in encouraging or discouraging members from different locations and cultures to speak up and

participate. Future research should examine specific communication strategies that may facilitate participation and other ways of overcoming barriers to inclusive team participation.

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