

Solution Focused Consulting for Global Virtual Teams

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This article describes special challenges of global virtual teams. Solution Focused coaching and consulting is presented as especially suitable to meet these challenges. A global virtual team coaching case is presented.

Global Virtual Teams

What are global virtual teams?

In many global corporations teams no longer consist of team members who are located in one location but the team is distributed over many countries and possibly also many time zones. The advantage for the company is that they it can react faster to customer requests and that the company is accessible 24/7 for the various customers from all over the world. The fact that you can unite talents from many different countries in one project or one team is also very useful. Companies can also offer home office jobs for people who are caring for children or elderly relatives, and thus avoid the loss of know-how and talent. Often global virtual teams work on projects in the matrix structure – however regular teams who are no longer co-located have become more and more frequent. In a team that we know, the team leader works from London, half of his team works in Poland, a quarter in Germany and the rest in France. Many outsourcing projects have led to such team structures.

Special challenges

Due to cost reductions, the members of such teams can often not meet face to face more than once a year. Most of the communication is therefore by a telephone or other media of virtual communication. For many team members the lack of body language signals makes collaboration difficult. Conflicts are often more difficult to resolve if you don't meet each other in person.

Misunderstandings are also much more likely if you are only communicating in written form: On the one hand facial expressions which would clarify the meaning of a statement in a face to face conversation are lacking and on the other hand it is more difficult to ask clarifying question without appearing negative in a written conversation. The fact that these teams often consist of members of different cultures doesn't make it easier. There are often misunderstandings about agreements, deadlines and responsibilities. One of the problems that is mentioned most often when we are working with virtual teams is the lack of accountability – somehow something that you promise to someone that you're not likely to run across at the coffee machine doesn't seem to be as urgent as something that you promise to someone that you see every day.

In one of our seminars about “Global Virtual Teams” we asked members from different nations about their interpretation of the sentence: “You will get their report on Friday.” The German participant said that it would be okay to get the report after lunch on Friday. This way she would be able to actually work on it before the end of business on Friday. For the French participant the end of business on Friday around 6 p.m. would still be okay – he would then read the report on the weekend or on Monday morning. The Indian participant said that it would be okay for him to get the report at 10 o’clock local time on Monday. He would probably not be able to read the report much earlier anyway since on Monday morning he would have to answer the e-mails and calls from the weekend. The participants of the seminar were very surprised about the different assessments and laughed about the result. They concluded that they would specify exactly which result they needed from whom by when exactly (time and date) so that everyone knows what the expectations are and nobody is disappointed.

Why is Solution Focused work especially suitable for global virtual teams?

As we have already mentioned, SF work tries to do without assumptions and interpretations as much as possible. Instead, we look for clear descriptions of the desired future. Focusing on this alone makes working in global virtual teams much easier. Instead of assuming that all Germans don’t have a sense of humor, all Indians are unreliable, etc. and becoming angry when something doesn’t happen the way we assumed it would happen, we simply assume that misunderstandings are normal. We therefore pick up the phone and clarify what we need to be doing differently.

General suspicion is turned into general acceptance. Studies of global virtual teams and intercultural collaboration show that trust and confidence, enthusiastic and appreciative communication as well as a high tolerance for ambiguity are essential for the success of global virtual teams. (Jarvenpaa, Sirkka & Leidner Dorothy E. (1999); Stahl, G. K. (2001)) Solution Focus exemplifies these success factors to a high degree: In our experience Solution Focused teamwork and Solution Focused team leadership are optimal for global virtual teams.

Solution Focused team coaching for virtual teams

Solution Focused coaching for virtual teams is similar to team coaching for co-located teams. The only difference is that most of the conversation will happen via telephone, via video conference or in a virtual conference room.

The success factors for virtual meetings are also similar to those of face to face meetings: There is a feeling of understanding. The goals of the participants are clear and compatible and problems are solved efficiently. There is an open and productive atmosphere. There is an even distribution of contributions during the meeting. In virtual meetings there is one additional difficulty: In most virtual meeting environments it is not possible to see whether someone is participating or doing something else like checking email (the German platform vitero is the only exception – www.vitero.de). Therefore, it is very important to make sure that you know who is still participating actively and who has decided to use his or her time differently.

We plan our virtual trainings consciously to include moments in which everyone can participate. If there is anyone for whom the conference is not the best use of his or her time, we don't see this as a personal criticism. Rather, we interpret this as the person's attempt at being efficient. If we know that somebody is not so interested in the topic of the training or conference, we can actively deal with it and avoid misunderstandings. For most teams our way of handling this issue serves as a good example: We often ask people whether their participation in a telephone conference is still useful for them and what would possibly make it more useful. If we're talking about an issue that is not so relevant for one of the participants, we offer that person to simply continue listening and do something else in the meantime. This way the participants can notice when the topic changes and come back to active participation when the topic turns to something more relevant to them. This possibility is not often used by virtual teams. People seem to fear is that their conversation partners will interpret this kind of behavior as a lack of respect. If you start by giving everybody the benefit of the doubt this can be avoided. The calmer and friendlier someone asks whether it is okay not to participate, the better for all involved. Compare: "This meeting is useless – I really have better things to do with my time" with "Okay I think you're really managing this very well. At the moment I don't think I can add anything. Would it be okay for you if I dial back in in half an hour or continue working on my presentation while I just listen?"

Case

In the following, we will describe a team training for global corporation.

Initial conversation

We met the team leader of a global team in the IT industry at a coaching conference. The team members were distributed across the US, Germany, France, UK, and Singapore. The team was responsible for the global marketing strategy of the company. All team members were managers themselves. They managed people who reported directly to them and also other people in the local marketing and sales organizations whom they were connected to via matrix structures. Ms Dupont was enthusiastic about the possibilities that SF work offers for global teams and wanted us to coach her and her team. She was full of praise for her team members, but thought that a coaching could help team members to deal with some processes in a faster and smoother way. Especially misunderstandings needed to be clarified more quickly and in a more natural way. Since each of her team members was also working in other global teams together with local marketing units a team coaching would also be useful for her team members in this context. Ms Dupont was very open and trusted us to elicit the goals of the coaching from the team and did not want to mention too many of her goals of the coaching. She really wanted to involve her team as much as possible in finding out what could be improved.

Team Interviews

Of course, she was enthusiastic about our suggestion to ask the team members what was going well and what could still be better. We split up the team members among ourselves in each of us had telephone conversations with five team members. We

led half open interviews with the following questions:

- “What do you have to get right as a team in the next year?”
- “Suppose, I call you again than half the year and your team has developed in the direction that you desire – what will you be telling me about your team then?”
- “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is that you have already reached that point (which means that no development is necessary) and 0 is the complete opposite, where do you see your team?”
- “Why is it X and not 0?”
- “What could be a next step in the direction of X+1”

The team members were all proud of their team since they were cooperating really well in spite of all the intercultural differences. They saw the design of the new global marketing strategy and good communication with local partners as the most important tasks for the next year. The team scale was between five and seven. Most team members mentioned as a next step that they would have to think about how to communicate the new strategy in the different countries together rather than doing it each by themselves. They had the feeling that they would be able to learn a lot from each other. Best practice sharing usually didn't happen because everybody was always pressed for time and this was something that everybody wanted to do -- but it somehow never happened. Most team members also wanted to try out new forms of communication like a webinar or web-conferencing. Some wanted to find out more personal information about

the other team members in order to better understand in which context the other people live and work.

Teamcoaching (online)

We agreed on three dates with two hours each for the team coaching. These coachings took place at rotating times of the day: This way, not only one location bore the brunt of having to stay late or getting up early in the morning. However, since everybody was very enthusiastic, it wasn't a problem if the Americans would have to get up very early once and team members in Singapore had to stay late and phone in from home. We used WebEx as a communication platform. WebEx, like other platforms (for example gotomeeting, ATT, open webinars, dimdim) offers the possibility to on the one hand share slides and on the other hand use electronic surveys or write something on to a slide and use it like a flip chart. Such joint activities are very useful to substitute the missing visual information. The three dates had different topics: The first meeting was about best practice sharing around communication strategy. In the second meeting team members talked about getting to know each other and understanding each other better. The last meeting happened a few weeks later and served to evaluate the results and to elicit further topics.

First meeting: Best Practice Sharing

The first thing that happened in the session was that we clarified the goals of the session together with the participants: “What should be better after two hours?”, “What needs to happen here to get there?” The participants jotted down their answers in the chat room of WebEx so we could get back to them at the end of the webinar. Participants primarily

wanted to exchange which procedures and communications strategies worked in the discussion of the marketing strategy with the local marketing teams and what were some of the pitfalls to avoid.

We then asked the participants to work in breakout rooms in mixed small groups (most conference lines today offer breakout rooms so that you can break up a larger group in a telephone conference into small groups just like you would when you are facilitating a face-to-face meeting). In the groups everybody was asked to share a highlight, a story where the communication had worked well in the last couple of weeks. They were also asked to take notes about what was their own contribution to that communication. Afterwards the whole group came back into the plenary and reported the results of the discussions. This was summarized right there in a word document under the heading "What is already working --what should we do more of?" The next question was about who would notice if the communication with the local marketing teams improved. The participants said that the team members in their local teams would notice, they themselves and also the customers would notice. The customers would notice that there is a more unified strategy which at the same time is customized for the local markets. Again, the group went into the breakout rooms. One group talked about how the team members from the local marketing teams would notice, the other group talked about how they would notice themselves, and the third group talked about how customers would notice. These results were then also discussed in the whole group. They summarized their ideas for implementation in the same Word document under the heading "What can we do to

improve the communication with the local marketing teams?" Later we heard that this word document had somewhat acquired a life of its own and was sent around in the whole marketing group. This was very positive for everyone. At the end of the meeting we looked at the goals set at the beginning of the meeting and realized that most of them had been reached.

Second meeting: getting to know each other

The second meeting had the goal of getting to know each other better. To prepare for the meeting we had sent an e-mail and asked the participants to write down their questions for the other team members. The team members answered with some serious but also some funny questions. There were questions like: "How does your school system work?" and "Have you ever ridden an elephant?" and anything in between. We created a small questionnaire from this selection of questions and asked everybody to answer those questions that he or she would like to answer. Everybody was asked to create one or two PowerPoint slides with the answers and some personal pictures.

In the Web meeting we asked everybody to pretend that we were having coffee together and explicitly mentioned that everybody should bring their favorite nonalcoholic drink - - coffee or tea -- for the telephone conference in the invitation. The meeting started with a small exercise. We asked the participants to think about one thing that they appreciate about each of the other participants, one thing that this person is doing that is useful for the team. They were then asked to share that observation with the respective person in the private chat room. Afterwards the

participants presented their sides and there was a lot of laughter and fun. People had the possibility to ask questions and explain about their personal life as much as they felt comfortable. After the meeting, the team felt that they had actually found out something important about the other team members and felt much more comfortable and closer to each other even though they hadn't been able to see each other face-to-face.

Third meeting: Follow-up / Review

The third meeting, the review meeting, started with a question: "What's better?" We wrote down the results on a PowerPoint slide. We then asked again what the team would have to get right in the next three months. This question was again answered by small groups in breakout rooms. Three points emerged. We wrote them down as scales on a PowerPoint slide:

Collaboration with the local organizations

0-----10

Understanding each other and taking time to develop the team spirit

0-----10

Dealing with misunderstandings

0-----10

The team agreed to scale these parameters individually and talk about them once a month in their weekly team call. They would then talk about what is going well and what could be the next step. Finally, we – the consultants – asked the team to listen to our observations about the team. We talked about what makes us confident that the team will reach their goals and we talked about what we observed that was already going into the desired direction.

The team had become accustomed to using WebEx meetings through these three team coachings and had started using the technology for many of their calls. We later got the feedback that working in small groups in the larger team call was very efficient and that they continued using breakout rooms in their calls. We will have another review meeting in half the year where we plan to ask: "What is better?" and "What are some of the things you have to get right in the next half year?"

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