



GLOBAL TEAMS MAKING THE PIECES FIT

Product of a global merger, **AstraZeneca** works to strengthen teamwork across borders. The challenges and lessons learned are the subject of this in-depth business case from Schneider-Ross.

by Robin Schneider, Managing Director, and Vivianne Näslund, International Consultant Schneider-Ross

In a global business environment it is perilous in the extreme for corporations to be too home-country dominated. The old model of previous centuries (which essentially translated colonialism into the commercial world)—where “mother knows best” and setting up in a new country meant installing reams of expats to “run the show”—has run out of road. It is both too costly (expats after all are very expensive) and insufficiently sensitive to local cultures and needs.

There are now estimated to be over 60,000 transnational corporations in the world, with over 800,000 foreign affiliates. It is no longer credible for an organisation to consider itself a global corporation and yet to be dominated by one nationality at the top. “Global” is now the name of the game; while companies such as BP may be listed in the FTSE 100, as illustrated by their recent re-branding, they have moved beyond being a “British” company and seek to develop a truly global culture.

In this environment, diversity (which at

its heart is about valuing and harnessing difference) becomes the midwife of the truly modern, global corporation. A number of leading multinationals have recognised this strategic imperative and have come together to form the Global Diversity Network (Altria, Barclays, BP, Convergys, Deutsche Bank, Dow, HP, Kodak, Nokia, Shell. See www.globaldiversitynetwork.com)

Global Teams At AstraZeneca

AstraZeneca is an ideal company to illustrate the challenges and opportunities presented by global teams. The company is itself an interesting product of a global merger—with strong Swedish (Astra) and British (Zeneca) roots, and a key market in the U.S. Moreover, research and development is, above all, about creativity and innovation and therefore a function where cultural diversity can make or break success.

We will be looking in-depth at one particular team. Donna Johnstone is a Global Project Director (GPD) for AstraZeneca R&D in Oncology. GPDs sit right at the

heart of the development process, taking the compounds that the scientists have come up with in discovery and deciding which (if any) should move on down the development chain through into trials and, eventually, to product launch.

Elements of diversity are built into the global products teams. The first is *functional diversity*—team members are drawn across more than a dozen functions (both scientific and other managerial disciplines such as legal, intellectual property, and finance). Team members remain in their functions—their remuneration is primarily a matter for their functional boss (a matter of some contentious debate)—and give just a proportion of their time to the Global Product team.

Johnstone has an overall team of 17 people and four sub-project teams; about a third are women, Whilst the majority are British (Alderley Park is the global centre for the company’s oncology work) there are a number of Swedes and Americans across the teams.

The Practical Implications Of Global Teamworking

So, it's goodbye to long term expats, and it's hello to shorter term assignments, lots of travel and virtual working. Leadership is no longer about working with a bunch of people who think and behave like you do and are based in the adjoining office. The complexities need working through.

Best practices that apply to any team also apply to global teams but cultural differences add another layer of complexity, so team members need to allow sufficient time up-front to discuss how they're going to work together. For instance, it may sound simple, but it's essential to create a supportive environment and reach agreement on how members communicate with each other, conduct meetings and make decisions. Approaches to these basic management procedures vary considerably from culture to culture.

Choosing Team Members

Traditionally, due to limited resources GPDs have just taken whomever the functions nominate for their team, but Donna says, "I worked hard to get diversity in this team". She included two Swedes who are over on secondment to Alderley Park.

Donna also points in particular to two unusual choices. She deliberately chose someone from outside the Pharmaceutical industry as her overall project manager. Paul Edwards had a career in the British Army, but what he lacked in detailed knowledge of the industry, he more than made up for with his project management skills. As Donna observes: "He brought a real rigour to our decision points and we had risk assessments up to our eyeballs. He made

sure that we were absolutely clear when making go/no go decisions—I'm not saying that we wouldn't have got there on our own, but it would have taken us longer."

It was another decision to step outside the usual selection pool that brought the most dramatic time savings (and time to market is perhaps the key determinant of success in the pharmaceuticals industry). Donna describes Andrew Hughes, the

"I'm not saying that we wouldn't have got there on our own, but it would have taken us longer."

**Donna Johnstone
AstraZeneca R&D**

on the leadership contributions of teammembers recruited from outside the pharmaceutical industry

medic on her team, as "not a card carrying oncologist". It was Andrew's idea whenever possible to use volunteer trials (for instance on healthy AstraZeneca employees) to establish some basic data on drug blood levels, rather than only do patient trials. This has dramatically reduced the timing of these first phase one trials from a period of two years down to six-twelve weeks.

Donna realized it was vital to the success of her team that she bring together participants who not only brought the required technical skills but also a diverse range of experiences and therefore outlooks. It was as important, of course, that those participants also had "good interpersonal skills—people

who will support each other if someone is struggling and challenge in a non-aggressive way—and have a can-do attitude."

Language and behaviours at meetings

British and American executives probably don't realise how much less complexity they have to deal with because the 'lingua franca' today is their own language. In English the subject, verb and object are usually at the beginning of a sentence and the rest is secondary information. This allows English speakers to interrupt each other more freely without losing too much of the overall meaning. On the other hand, in German and some major Asian languages, the verb (and the tense) is at the end of the sentence. Consequently, people from these cultures may find it very difficult to interrupt a discussion, as they are not used to doing so in their own native language.

People who feel free to interrupt usually dominate team meetings and do not allow non-native English speakers to participate fully in discussions. Consequently, minority views may not be heard. It's quite common to observe non-native English speakers saying absolutely nothing during a meeting.

Conversely, where teams are aware of the challenges of working in a second (or third) language (and the need for time to think, preparation and indeed stamina) they can turn this potential barrier to team working to their benefit.

Having Swedes in the project team has in Donna's view, the merit of "making you more careful about both what you say and how you say it." Ensuring that there is a common understanding about what is meant (for instance) by a term such as

“goals” is vital in any account—regardless of the particular language.

Early in her career, for example, she erroneously made the assumption that a team of British and American scientists had the same understanding of the meaning of the term “deadline”. “For the Brits missing a deadline would be a major calamity—next to death. For the Americans a deadline was something they would be “shooting” for—great if you hit it but not a disaster if you don’t.”

Different Behavioural Norms

Just as the same language can mean different things to the same people, so can the same behaviour.

Many British AZ team leaders in charge of teams with a great number of Swedes constantly express irritation that the Swedes will not complain to them directly if they are unhappy about decisions. Instead the Swedes will talk to a Swedish colleague of similar status to the team leader who speaks good English, asking him or her to talk to the British team leaders about their grievances.

There are many reasons for this approach: first of all, many Swedes are reluctant to criticise a colleague publicly. Secondly, they find it difficult to express sensitive issues in English—they prefer to do so in Swedish. This line of action is very common in other cultures, too. It’s important team leaders understand their colleagues are not ‘going behind their back,’ but are simply looking for a way to express their opinions in their mother tongue.

Swedes are also reluctant to criticise in an area that they are not themselves an expert. In a multi-disciplinary team, where there

will often be only one person from each function, this can cause a problem. As Donna explains: “I had a chat with a couple of my Swedish team members because I wanted—and needed—them to be more challenging of others. I had to reassure them that this would not be interpreted as being rude.”

Different cultures also have different needs for consensus. Clearly, it is therefore critical to identify on the agenda ahead of the meeting, any items that are going to require a decision. Moreover, by circulating information or proposals in advance it makes it possible for team members to consult with colleagues where they feel this is appropriate.

Donna points out that yet again this is something that might be prompted by a cultural difference, but helps the whole team “Forewarning when key decisions will need to be made helps the Swedes who can then come to the meeting having consulted with colleagues and being prepared to make a decision—but it is also helpful for British team members who may be less experienced. It helps everyone.”

Traveling, Virtual Working and Time Zones

Global teamworking has some inescapable practical questions to address. When should the team be brought physically together? What are the implications of heavy travel schedules on work-life balance and (of course) budgets? How can teams work most effectively virtually? What are the implications of having team members in very different time zones?

These are all practical issues that are ignored by team leaders at their peril



Donna Johnstone
Global Project Director (GPD)
AstraZeneca R&D

because they can lead to significant stress, disruption and ineffective meetings.

Donna Johnstone is convinced of the importance of meeting face-to-face “Some people don’t feel this is important, but I insist we get the team together physically from time-to-time.” The team has also decided that these meetings will only be on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays so that no-one has to travel over a weekend. They also recognise that there is a long period from the end of June through to early September when “either the Swedes or the Brits are on holiday, the Americans despair of both of us.”

Inevitably, however, virtual teamworking is a critical element in the mix of meetings. Initially on merger, AstraZeneca teams used video conferencing extensively. Interestingly, there has been a move back towards teleconferencing. “In my experience” Donna remarks “behaviours are better and it’s less isolating if you happen to be a sole member on one site; and you don’t get the side comments.”



Vivianne Näslund
International Consultant



Robin Schneider
Managing Director

About the authors: Robin Schneider is Managing Director of Schneider-Ross, a leading global equality and diversity consultancy. Vivianne Näslund is an international consultant, facilitator and coach who is also a Schneider-Ross Associate. Robin has British and Swiss nationality, Vivianne is a Swedish national who has also lived and worked in France, Switzerland, Germany, and the UK. For more information, visit their website at www.schneider-ross.com.

Donna is going to bring in Japanese team members. This will inevitably bring significant time zone issues, making it impossible to get a virtual gathering of the team members at the same time because “by the time they are up in the U.S., it’s late night in Japan.” She adds laconically that this positions Europe as the ideal bridge builder “although it does mean long days.”

Simple Things Make It Easier

In our experience there are three simple measures which will help a global team get off to a good start:

Prepare the leader. When executives start an international assignment or take on a role in a multi-cultural team, many believe they understand what will be involved. But, once they get into the process (past the ‘honeymoon’ phase) they are always surprised at how painful, tiresome, complicated and time-consuming it can be to work in a global environment. They wish they had known more, had been better prepared, so they could have anticipated stressful and messy situations and recognised the problems before they arose, or at

least before they escalated into serious trouble. Competencies such as openness, ability to deal with ambiguity, patience, resilience and humour are critical.

In our experience, leaders really benefit from having an external cross-cultural mentor or coach. As one AstraZeneca executive put it ‘I know I can ask a colleague for advice but I don’t necessarily want to discuss my leadership style and concerns with one.’

Choose teammates wisely. Once an organisation has decided that it needs to pull together a global team, there is usually a great deal of pressure to get going quickly. Moreover, where teams are selected from across a number of functions with most members giving only part of their time, there can be a tendency to rely solely on a functional nomination process. It is vital, however, that the team leader is absolutely clear about the interpersonal qualities (and technical skills required); this can take time; Johnstone estimates three months.

Have a face-to-face launch meeting. A global team is like any other team, it needs a sense of identity and clarity over what it is there to achieve.

least before they escalated into serious trouble.

The ability to motivate, inspire and emotionally connect with people are key skills for any team leader, but to do that effec-

A launch meeting is the best way to develop a supportive environment and help ensure that everyone in the team can contribute to and feel ownership for its vision and mission. At the initial meeting for her “Gateway 2” project team, Donna found a symbolic way of doing this. She decided to run a competition across the team members in order to design a project logo. The team voted for their favourite and it has now become their logo, a hallmark of quality, “we stick it on everything”.

In addition, the launch meeting is also the time to work through how the team is going to work together. This is the point for the team to talk about linguistic inequality—different levels of fluency in the working language—and to discuss the communications norms of that language. This is also when they can set standards, like items being pulled from the agenda unless the papers have been supplied at least the night before (which addresses both language issues, and the inefficiency of trying to discuss a document that the teammates in the room can see, but the rest, working virtually, cannot). Also they can agree that all outcomes of meetings and decisions will be put in writing—sounds obvious and simplistic, but it’s surprising how often teams don’t do this.

In many ways, global teams are no different from any other team; you would use the same types of leadership practices in both. However, as the added dimensions of cross-cultural and virtual working contribute a degree of risk; you *cannot* get away with sloppy team leadership.

The birth of truly global corporations is painful, but valuing diversity is the key to healthy delivery!