We’re Not the Center of the Universe Anymore!

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It’s early into the 21st century and industry and service organizations are reviewing their plans and trying to determine how they will stay competitive and profitable in the coming years. Outsourcing and global expansion is on the lips of every board member at every board meeting. “Where do we expand, what resources will be needed to meet our goals and will we be financial competitive”? These are just a few of the question that are being asked, and the answers probably won’t surprise you.

My employment with Delphi Electronics and Safety began in 1971. At that time we were part of General Motors and a preferred supplier. Over the years we have experienced several different changes in ownership and partnerships within the automotive electronics industry.

My career has gone through several iterations. I began as an hourly employee and worked my way up to management. This growth in the organization gave me an appreciation for what my employees experience as well as helped to develop my “hands-on” management skills. My current position is TS16949 Worldwide Manager. This position is part of our Customer Satisfaction organization and specifically work with quality systems.

Originally, the focus of my responsibilities was centered on Kokomo, Indiana. But within a few short months, I began to interact with my global counterparts. I hosted a weekly conference call where I tried to bring everyone together and drive common activities at each of our worldwide locations. One Wednesday morning as I was reviewing a proposal, someone on the phone casually mentioned, “Kokomo is NOT the center of the universe anymore”. My first reaction was one of surprise, but then it hit me...like a ton of bricks...companies are no longer centrally located. What works in Kokomo, Indiana, may not be appropriate in Szombatheley, Hungary. It was time to take off the shades and view business and decision making in a new way. It was time to think and interact globally and time to recognize that the “it has to come from the home office to be right” would not drive the organization to the next level, the level of success.

Kokomo, Indiana may not be the center of the universe, but neither are the other sites that make up Delphi Electronics and Safety. This is a concept that each PML (Product Manufacturing Location) had to accept. When trying to reach a consensus, our Singapore Quality Systems Manager, wanted items that would be specific in to her site, so would Mexico, Portugal, and every other site Quality Systems Manger. This made reaching a decision and adopting new processes difficult. There would be several days when I would find myself contacting each Quality Systems Manager and talking about their specific issues and what I could do to bring the team together. Lesson learned: As a leader in a global organization, you must have empathy for others, and through this understanding bring the team together to what is best for the whole organization. The tool: Communication, both group and individual.
Industry trends for the 21st century

Outsourcing is one of the primary tools that companies are using in order to stay competitive and also outsourcing has become a financial leverage tool. As shown on the figure below,

Fortune 500 companies are showing a trend of outsourcing facets of their business more and more since 1999. Also supporting this report is the study conducted by Rand Labor and Population (2004). This study suggest that “the future reach of economic globalization will be more extensive than before, affecting industries and workforce segments relatively insulated from trade related competition in the past. . . The new era of globalization – marked by growing trade in intermediate goods and services, expanding capital flows . . . Globalization will continue its record to date of contributing economic benefits in the aggregate. (Karoly & Panis, 2004).

This trend is also evident at Delphi Electronics and Safety. The corporation has moved several key operations to the Asian-Pacific rim, Europe, Mexico, and South America. Not only is outsourcing predominate in the twenty-first century, but also mergers and acquisitions. Delphi Electronics and Safety recognizes the importance of being competitive in several markets and has acquired several facilities in Europe and Mexico in the past several years (post 2000).

According to researchers Karoly & Panis, there are three basic trends which are impacting organizations direction towards globalization and outsourcing. One implication of these trends is that:

- Employees will work in more decentralized, specialized firms, and employer-employee relationships will become less standardized and more individualized (2004).

This is very evident with Delphi Electronics and Safety. This trend is also where my adventure begins as the Quality Systems Manager. In order to understand the impact of this scenario, it is important for the reader to understand key terminology that is used in this business. Before moving forward, I will offer a list of definitions that will aid you in understanding what is happening and also assist you in answering the case studies at the end of this article.
Key terminology

Quality Systems Manager: an individual who coordinates and manages processes that can impact required customer certifications.

TS 16949:2002: a technical specification where certification is required by the automotive industry.

Product Manufacturing Location (PML): the facility, location or site where product is manufactured for either an internal or external customer.

Commonization: a term used in the automotive industry to drive common processes, practices and procedures.

NetMeeting: an IT tool used in meetings where all participants can view the information that is being discussed and/or reviewed.

Quality Task Team (QTT): Central team that address issues within the organization.

Background Information

I am the TS 16949 Worldwide manager for Delphi Electronics and Safety, Kokomo Operations. I have held this role for approximately three years (officially and unofficially). In conjunction with this role, I also manage our Document and Data Control Specialist, Change Implementation Leaders and Internal Auditors. Some of my responsibilities include communicating quality systems protocol to the organization, writing and revising procedures, planning and coordinating assessments and looking for best practices. One of the most significant and critical aspect of my job is the role of “global competency leader”. In this role, I host a conference call and NetMeeting every Wednesday. The participants of this call are the quality systems managers and leaders from all of our Product Manufacturing Locations.

As illustrated on the map below, Delphi Electronics and Safety has a global presence which makes understanding diversity a critical part of the business:

The purpose of the conference call is to review all TS16949:2002, customer-specific requirements, audit results, process maps and procedures. Looking from the outside in, this would seem like standard process where little or no conflict would exist. Expect the one component in this process is that we are trying to resolve global issues where every location must buy-in to the resolution. Why would this be a problem? There are two reasons. First, you are leading from a distance; secondly, you are leading a global task team that may not be receptive to your leadership style and is made up of several different ethnic groups. Let’s take a look at the last item, understanding cultures.
Understanding cultural diversity when working in a global corporation

Before we can effectively address the concerns, it is important to understand diversity. What is diversity? According to the Society of Human Resource Management, a broad definition of diversity “ranges from personality and work style to all of the visible dimensions of diversity, to secondary influences such as religion, socioeconomics and education (www.shrm.org/diversity/definingdiversity.asp). Diversity in its most simplistic form is the fact or quality of being different. Ethnic diversity refers to different ethnic groups and diversity will encompass race, gender, age and social class differences.

When several different cultural groups come together to make a decision, the following concerns become a reality. First of all, since all members are not in the same country, they are not in the same time zone. So immediately, you may be asking someone in Singapore to call in to a meeting at 7:30am your time and it is the middle of the night for them. You are taking time away from their family and any other activity they may have had planned. As a leader and/or contributor to the meeting, it is important that you are sensitive to her schedule and stay focused to the task. Remember that the person who is North America (same time zone) may want to have conversation that is not related to the agenda.

The next concern that you may encounter associated with cultural differences is the accents or languages. Even though the “parent” company may be American based, most sites that are abroad are headed by “nationals”. It has been my experience that most individuals who are in leadership positions speak English; however, when you are communicating through telephone lines, it may be difficult to understand what the person is saying due to background noises, bad telephone connections and accents.

A major communication concern is word choice. The American language is filled with acronyms and slang. Even in a professional setting, we sometimes lose sight of what is deemed as “appropriate” business language. Our word choice can tear down relationships very quickly.

While in Braga, Portugal, I was communicating with a manager who was of another culture. He continually referred to the women of the organization as “girls”. The girls were the “workers”, the non-decision makers. During a conversation, I asked why most of the office personnel were guys. I was quickly corrected by his reply: “the girls work in the factory, the men are usually supervisors”. Even though I meant no disrespect, the word “guys” had a negative connotation. Word choice is critical and we must “think before speaking”.

Related to the above topic, is that in many cases, the leader may have never met the individuals on the conference call. All communication has been through an electronic medium and no true relationships have been formed. Since the leader has not developed a strong support unit, consensus may be difficult in problem resolution.

The next cultural concern is not being able to understand what a person is thinking from a conceptual standpoint. Even though you are working for the same organization, it is hard to visualize what ideas are being presented if you have not been at the actual site. This can cause a leader to “close” an idea without having all the facts. It can also lead others in the group to fall prey to the “not invented here” syndrome.

This syndrome occurs when you have multiple sites that present ideas which they own, but other sites are hesitant about buying into the ideas, because they did not originate in their location. This syndrome can cause conflict and tension within the team. Ideas are never given the chance to be fully heard or to materialize. When an idea or change is implemented and there is no consensus, it can be difficult to determine if the change has occurred. This happens because individuals do not want to change due to the work that is required.

The other cultural differences that can occur are related to the leader responsibilities, “Leading from a distance”. When leading a global team, the leader must remember that they cannot micro-manage. Most of the individuals on the team will not be a direct report to you, they will probably be reporting to someone in their home country. This relates heavily to Biblical scripture where Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (Luke 16:13, New Living Translation) Many on your team will be pulled in different directions,
wanting to please their local management, yet wanting to work on your task as well. This is a difficult bridge to cross and as a leader you must make sure that you do not alienate your team member’s leader.

As a leader in this scenario, you need to “steer the ship”, not maneuver it. Leading different cultures on the same team will require excellent communication skills (this includes listening) and you must be able to give direction and empower others to complete the task, or implement the change on behalf of the organization. After you have become comfortable enough to empower, you will now have to resolve yourself to the fact that you may not be able to verify completed actions. Budget constraints and travel restrictions may hinder the way you can monitor the effectiveness of information.

The final concern you may encounter is that it will be difficult to establish priorities on data, because each site will be using their own metrics to determine what assignments, task or changes will add value to their site. You will have to prove that the there will be substantial cost savings for each site and that the site will benefit from the team’s decision.

The information in the section above is not all inclusive and just represents a sample of the challenges you will face leading a global team. You will need to keep an open mind and eliminate the perceptions you may have about others who are different from you.

You’re on holiday?

It is 10:00am (your time) and a note just came across your desk to coordinate a global meeting. What are going to do? As you fumble through the rolodex and write down the phone numbers you suddenly remember, China is on holiday…what am I going to do? Besides, how am I going to explain to everyone that my contact in China is celebrating Children’s Day, (the most memorable day of Chinese kids all over the country and a national holiday)? Last month you could not reach anyone because it was the Chinese International Labor Day. But China is not the only country that you are dealing with. Your partners in Mexico are honoring Primero de Mayo, the equivalent of the U.S. Labor Day, and in Portugal, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary is taking place. The list goes on and on. Your task as a leader and partner with these cultures is to understand and recognize the importance of these holidays.

The easy thing would be to operate under the holidays of the parent company, (e.g., July 4th, Labor Day, Memorial Day) and ignore the holidays and celebrations of other countries. However, a strong working relationship is not built by being selfish. If you are working in a global environment, it means that you must be flexible enough to appreciate the differences that each person brings to the team. This equates to being informed about what is important to your partners, learning about their cultures, traditions and holidays and finally allowing them the time off to celebrate what is important to them. To answer the question posed at the beginning of this section…you schedule those who can attend and you update those that cannot. In the end, when you are facing a task which seems insurmountable, your partners will be there for you and that is what it is all about…TEAMWORK!

The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (August 15),

Dealing with your perceptions

Perceptions are our reality. I view perceptions as a small piece of carry-on luggage that we carry with us everywhere. In this luggage we have housed our beliefs and values, our fears of others and even our character. The downside of this occurs when we have closed our minds to the differences of others and face the world with an ethnocentric attitude. Having an ethnocentric attitude is the conscious or subconscious belief that one’s own group or culture is inherently superior to all others and that individual’s culture is the central culture. This attitude will doom you as a leader in a global environment. Everyone adds value, each person on your team, regardless of location, race, or ethnicity, provides a gift or talent that you need to be successful. For me, this has been an easy task. I refer to Psalm 139:14-16 which allows me to keep things in perspective. “Thank you for making me so complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—and how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb.
You saw me before I was born. Everyday of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.” (Holy Bible, NLT).

Not everyone will be of your faith, not everyone will believe as you do, but you can eliminate the “negative baggage” by remembering that each member of your team is of God’s plan and that they do have a purpose. With this attitude you will move from ethnocentrism to polycentrism. A polycentric attitude is one where you believe that there are as many points of view as there are people. Keep an open mind!!!

**What can you expect?**

If experience is the best teacher, then I should be an expert in understanding global teams and “roadblocks”. Unfortunately, this is not the case. As mentioned earlier, one of my tasks is to conduct a global conference call each Wednesday morning. The call begins at 7:30am (EST) and usually will last until 9:00am (EST). When I first acquired this responsibility, I had not met any of the participants of the call. There was no relationship and language was definitely a barrier for me. I struggled to understand the dialect and found myself asking the person speaking to repeat themselves...several times. This was very annoying to the individual and I felt uncomfortable in this situation.

The next roadblock that was starring at me as I took the driver’s seat was my credibility. Did I say credibility? After all, I was the leader, shouldn’t everyone just accept what I had to say and move on to the next “hot topic” of the morning? Well, that is not what happened. Yes, I had power. I learned it was “legitimate power”, power that is derived from my position in the organization, but that was not enough. No one had a clue as to who I was or what I could bring to the table.

In case you have not discovered the different types of power that exist, I will take a few moments to introduce them to you, before moving on. In the most basic sense, power can be defined as positional power or personal power. Positional power is based on a person's position in the organization (e.g., manager, team leader, group leader, etc.). Personal power is the power a person gains from the relationships they have with people.

Theorist, French & Raven suggests that power arises from five sources:

1. **Reward power**: Supervisors have reward power if they can grant rewards.
2. **Coercive power**: Supervisors who threaten punishment and discipline use coercive power.
3. **Legitimate power**: Supervisors gain compliance by relying on their position or rank.
4. **Expert power**: Knowledge or valuable information gives a person expert power over those who need that information.
5. **Referent or charismatic power**: People are often influenced by others because of some tangible or intangible aspect of another’s personality. (Leonard & Hilgert, 2004, p. 48).

Leading in a global environment will require you to be aware of the different types of power and how they can affect your ability to get the job done. Remember, in some cultures, respect for the hierarchy of leadership is the most important thing for followers.

I recognized that the immediate success of my team was going to lie in my ability to build a relationship with each quality systems manager or leader around the world. Now, I needed a plan. Recognizing that budget was a constraint, travel was not an immediate option. However, there was nothing prohibiting me from using technology to assist me in this endeavor. Key learning point one: recognize the resources you have at your disposal. For about a month I utilized electronic mail and telephone calls to get to know each of my counterparts and learn about their facilities. More importantly, I knew that it was important to them that I try to communicate in their native language (this was a “piece of cake” for my counterpart in Liverpool, England ). So each e-mail or telephone conversation, I learned to greet in the quality systems manager native language. Most would think that this gesture would be demeaning, but what happened was that each person felt that they mattered to me. Even today, my conservations will begin with a greeting and a few simple words in another person’s native language.

I was starting to build relationships, but that was just the first hurdle. The next step would be to successfully implement change, and move the organization to the next level. With all of this talent calling in and providing
ideas, how was I going to decide on what to do? I may have been the leader, but I was not the subject matter expert for every task. Second key learning point: Recognize when to let someone else take the lead.

In Greenleaf’s writing of The Servant as Leader, he suggest “the servant-leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead (1991, p. 7). When leading from a distance in a global community, you must recognize that there will be times when you are the leader and times when you are the servant. This is especially critical for United States based sites that are leading global ventures. Some many “home offices” or “parent companies” take the approach that if it is developed, designed or created here, it is not of value. In a business that is a servant organization or servant led, the leadership recognizes that “they are not the center of the universe anymore”. Key learning point three: You do not have to be the creator of all things. Other people in the organization, around the world have valid ideas and suggestions that need to be considered, and in some cases implemented.

What I learned was that I received much more participation and consensus, when I let others take the lead. It became easier to get the group to agree, because each PML recognized that if they presented an idea that was cost-effective, quality-driven, and applicable to all locations, we would consider and implement it, if applicable. Finally, the barriers, detours and roadblocks were coming down. I was building relationships. As budget constraints were lifted, our Kokomo facility hosted a Global Quality Systems Managers workshop. Quality Systems Managers and Leaders from around the world gathered at our Learning Center for one week. The best money ever spent. Key learning point four: Nothing can replace face-to-face contact. During this week, I was able to meet all those individuals I spoke with on the telephone. This was not just a week of knowledge sharing, but also of team and relationship building. I was not the only one who had not met the others. Since the team hailed everywhere from Flint, Michigan to Buenos Aires, Argentina it represented a “getting to know you event”.

I asked each person to prepare a 10-minute presentation about their PML and also to bring their top three issues they wanted to discuss. This was a definite community building exercise that every member of the team enjoyed.

What is happening now?

The team has been together now for over three years. The members have changed due to promotions and relocations, but the cohesiveness of the team is still strong. As a new member of the team comes on board, we go through the stages of team development.

Forming - Team members come together, orient themselves to being on a team, and start to get to know one another as team members rather than just fellow employees. This is a very difficult step when the team members are spread across the world
Storming - Team members begin to understand the task, no roles have been defined, and members may be anxious and impatient.
Norming - Team members reconcile differences among themselves, set norms, and finally begin to get used to working together.
Performing - Team members reconciled most of their differences and are comfortable with each other.
The good news is we spend a lot less time storming, because the accepted norms of behavior have been established.

Our team still loses sight of the big picture at times, and we forget to think in terms of global implementation versus PML implementation, but overall, the process works well and is now the model for new teams that are being developed in the Customer Satisfaction competency.

**Reinforcing the Learning**

Throughout this article, I have suggested key learning concepts that you should walk away with after reading this article. Before moving on to the case studies, let’s take a moment to review.

1. Key Learning Point 1: Recognize the resources you have at your disposal
2. Key Learning Point 2: Recognize when to let someone else take the lead.
3. Key Learning Point 3: You do not have to be the creator of all things.
4. Key Learning Point 4: Nothing can replace face-to-face contact.
5. Key Learning Point 5: Choose your words wisely, what may not be offensive to you, can be offensive in other cultures.

**SERVANT LEADERS IN A GLOBAL ORGANIZATION**

Can servant leaders survive in a global organization? Many proponents of servant leadership would answer that question with an astounding yes; yet the truth is that survival is not always possible unless the servant leader has a clear understanding of the cultures they are working in. Many cultures believe that it is improper or disrespectful to take on a superior role to someone who has been defined as the “leader” of a group or organization.

A woman who is a servant leader will struggle being recognized in a traditional Asian culture as any type of leader. If she starts to release control to her Asian male counterpart, he will view this action as normal, because the male is the predominant decision-making figure in this culture. In the Hispanic culture, they have a total respect for leadership. They honor positions and would be reluctant to take a leadership role feeling that it may be wrong.

As stated earlier, a personal encounter with a German male leader was very difficult. I was in a position to make a difference and then turn the role of leader over to this German male. During our first encounter, the male assumed the superior role and continually referred to me and other female employees as “the girls”. He believed that women in the organization could not be in a leadership role. To counteract this behavior and opinion, it was important for me to take on the role of a transformational and situational leader. I worked very closely with this individual to help him recognize that women could be leaders. The next step was to allow him to recognize the strengths I brought to the organization and the strengths he brought to the organization. Once this was clear, I was able to be a servant leader. Where this man possessed superior knowledge and skills, I stepped back and learned from him; where I was able to share knowledge and learning, I took that as an opportunity to be a situational leader.

The examples above are just a small sample of what a servant leader must understand. Cultural differences make it difficult to be a servant leader, but not impossible. Each person on this earth is gifted by God with the ability to do wonderful works. A servant leader working in a global community has the ability to be world changer by understanding cultural differences, working through them and giving others an opportunity to lead when they should follow, regardless of race, creed or color.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION**

You have been assigned to gather a cross-functional global team to resolve an accounting programming issue that impacts four of your seven global sites. You have been selected to lead the team based on your experience, so several members of the team will have higher positions than you. Define the steps you will need to take to bring the team together and how will you “get pass” the power issues?
CASE STUDY

The corporate organization has rolled out a new procedure which will require your PML and others to change their current practices and write a supplement procedure to address the new requirements. Currently PMLs in Mexico, Singapore, Portugal and Indiana have procedures which should meet the new requirements with little or no updating. Your organization (Indiana) has always taken the lead on revising procedures and you feel that it would be faster to just modify your procedure and have everyone else adopt it. You decide to bring the situation to the team and discuss it as well as present your idea in your weekly meeting.

The meeting begins and you have made all the changes and strongly suggest that the team adopt and move on to the next agenda item. Your team member from Mexico speaks up and finds some discrepancies with your work. You ignore him and ask if anyone else has a “problem”. No one speaks up and your move on to the next agenda item. Later in the week, you receive a call from the representative from Portugal who has shared the procedure with her management and has some pretty strong feedback for you. You tell your counterpart in Portugal that you cannot implement the changes because the procedure has already been submitted, approved and is scheduled for release in the morning.

Note: Hierarchical structure is very important in Portugal, the employees always follow what the managers’ wants and there is a very formal structure, where senior management is addressed by Mr. or Ms. and you always knock on a door before entering.

Reluctantly, your counterpart hangs up and the procedure is released. At the next scheduled meeting, only a few participants phone in and there is no collaboration on the new topics.

Based on this case, answer the following questions.
1. What went wrong in this situation?
2. What could you have done differently?
3. What information would be required for you to make a better decision?
References


