

Hayden Green New Zealand Journal

I have been fortunate enough to have worked and travelled throughout the world, developing a deep appreciation for cultural diversity. Whilst I have always endeavoured to contribute to the places I have visited physically and intellectually with knowledge sharing, I have never encountered a system where I could work with many cultures at the same time, from our home countries, for the greater good. I often dream about how to address the needs of the vulnerable in society and how I would love to be part of a nation that reflected the makeup of the United Nations.

Bring on GEEbiz and social media!!!

I quickly learnt this program is as much about understanding yourself and how you communicate, without the >75% body language we normally so heavily rely on, as it is about addressing the needs of the vulnerable in society. From the outset it was clear that this was more than a competition or team development program, rather it's about broadening your perceptions and breaking down perceptual barriers and biases, whilst also developing a deeper understanding of the challenges of a more globalised society. And challenges there were!

As the program kicked off I found myself co-leading the team of seven very diverse members from around the world. I was both excited and apprehensive of what to expect over the next three weeks. I quickly sent out the welcome email with a bit of humour and a welcoming tone, enticing our new team into a cyberspace version of brainstorming. With great ideas coming through we felt we were well on the way, and that's when the earthquake hit, metaphorically and physically.

Even without ever physically meeting our fellow team members and after only being in contact for a few days through social media, our bond had formed and came to fruition with an outpouring of both concern and support for our fellow team member in Nepal, where the earthquake hit. Fortunately, after some delay, our team member confirmed she was ok and whilst it was clearly going to be tricky, she committed to contributing as best she could, and she did.

Aside from language, the obvious cross-cultural communications challenge, leading a team without being able to pick up verbal silence, tone of voice and the shaking of heads brings a unique challenge. Whilst it was certainly thought-provoking keeping the team engaged and progressing towards the finish line, there was plenty of movement in coming up with great ideas to address the needs of the vulnerable in society.

Converting ideas into actual output in the form of a report was another story however, and I worked particularly hard to make this happen, quickly realizing that I did not have any relevant legitimate, reward, or referent power that I could use to make this happen. Maybe a just little touch of coercive and expert power, simply due to the fact English was my first language and someone had decided to appoint me co-leader.

Assertiveness seemed to work, but why? Why did I have to jump between comforting, communicating, coordinating and conflict resolving? How can I retain the multicultural heterogeneity of the team whilst developing some norms that can keep us on track and get things happening? Aha! Following a bit of research I realized there was a cross-cultural difference in power-distance and that some of our team value authority and receiving commands without consultation and debate. Obviously I did not head directly down that route with a diverse team, however it did provide insight to get things moving.

One key personal takeaway from the exercise however, which may be useful to apply to a business context as the world becomes more globalized and makes greater use of social media, remote working and virtual teams, is how easy it is to maybe appear engaged and active, but in fact not actually produce any tangible output. For example it seems all too easy for someone to hit 'like' or put a smiley face, maybe even write a positive comment about others idea, giving the perception of engagement, but possibly not actually producing anything tangible. It reminds me of a point my manager used to make when mentoring me on leadership, to not "mistake movement for action".

However, in great style it all came together in the final 48 hours, and every member contributed a key section to the final report. When learning that I was a co-leader, which I felt was an honour, I set myself the goal of 100% engagement. Whilst I had to use every (virtual) tool in my toolbox to achieve this, as a team leader I am very proud of that specific outcome. We retained all members, motivated them by understanding their drives, emotions, and needs, ensuring the final report has a contribution from everyone, even our wonderful member who had to endure two horrific earthquakes.

One question that I would love to study following this experience is, 'do we more readily trust people in face-to-face teams, or distant virtual teams?'

Through developing my self-awareness (understanding my beliefs, values and attitudes) I believe this project has developed my global mind-set with better knowledge of people and cultures. My final takeaway from this exercise is that whilst diversity probably meant that it took longer for the team to perform, that same diversity has provided diverse knowledge resulting in greater creativity, better decisions on this complex problem, and most importantly lots of fun and some damn good mates!