DEPARTEMENT TOEGEPASTE ECONOMISCHE WETENSCHAPPEN

ONDERZOEKSRAPPORT NR 9679

Meaningful Participation in Transnational Teams

by

M. Janssens

J.M. Brett

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Naamsestraat 69, B-3000 Leuven

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Maddy Janssens
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Departement Toegepaste Economische Wetenschappen
Naamsestraat 69
3000 Leuven
Belgium

Jeanne M. Brett
Northwestern University
J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management
2001 Sheridan Road
Evanston, IL 60208
USA

Abstract

This article discusses the process of meaningful participation in transnational teams. We first distinguish three sources of heterogeneity inherent to transnational teams: differences in cultural values, tensions between local and global perspectives, and differences in power and status. Drawing on prior research, we point to the importance of these groups establishing externally-oriented ambassadorial and task coordinating activities directed vertically to corporate management and laterally to the local units. Such an outward focus, however, confronts the team with complexity and potential conflicts and the need to develop an internal process that is able to deal with these differences. We call such an internal process meaningful participation by which we mean a pattern of interaction that involves deferring to different group members as their knowledge and expertise become relevant to the group's task. In order to achieve this process, we suggest a stakeholders' approach to the development of interpersonal trust. We also discuss how stakeholders'-based interpersonal trust with its emphasis on respect for each groups members' interests and stakes can help deal with the three sources of heterogeneity in transnational teams.

Introduction

To be successful in today's global marketplace, companies need to have the flexibility to serve the needs of many different customers, preserve economies of scale, and transfer learning from one part of the organization in one part of the world to another part of the organization in another part of the world (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989). To do so, companies frequently are relying on transnational teams (Snell, Canney Davison, Hambrick, & Snow, 1995). A transnational team is a work group composed of multinational members whose normal assignments may span different functions and geographical areas. The team's task is to design a new product, service, or organizational policy that will be implemented in units of the organization located in different countries. For example, a transnational team of production managers may be charged with deciding how to consolidate production in order to take advantage of economies of scale, labor, and distribution. Successful transnational teams may transcend the limits of the formal organization, integrate ideas from many parts of the organization as well as from the environment, and teach the organization new methods.

Research on the relationship between group composition and group effectiveness generally indicates that heterogeneous groups, which transnational teams are by definition, have greater ability to innovate and learn than homogeneous groups (e.g. Jackson, 1992; Nemeth, 1986). At the same time, heterogeneity is associated with different values, attitudes, and norms which threaten the group's ability to reach consensus (e.g. Shaw, 1981; Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985). A major challenge, and the theme of this article is how to manage transnational teams in a way that maintains the heterogeneity of perspectives and input that is crucial for creativity, learning, and implementation, but which also allows the group to reach decisions.

In order to manage this challenge, we propose a process which we call meaningful participation. In laying the ground work for this approach, we first discuss sources of heterogeneity inherent in transnational teams: cultural values, local-global perspectives, and power differences. We then review the literature on group functioning, discussing the external strategies that appear to be necessary for a transnational team's success (Ancona, 1990), and the internal strategies that transnational teams have been found to use (Canney Davison, Snow, Snell, & Hambrick, 1995). Finally, we present our recommended approach, meaningful participation. Meaningful participation is a group process characterized by team members' respect for each other's expertise and differing cultural backgrounds, and by an interaction pattern that differentially involves team members as their knowledge, expertise, contacts, or constituencies become relevant to the team's task¹. The theoretical basis for this internal strategy is stakeholders' analysis. The psychological condition necessary for its success is trust.

Heterogeneity in Transnational Teams

The research that has been done on transnational teams indicates that these teams confront the same management problems as national teams, but that the complexity of the problems and the logistics of interaction are often much greater than most managers and team members anticipate (Canney Davison, 1994; Canney Davison, et al., 1995; Snell et al., 1995). The dynamics of any team will be affected by members' personalities, norms, knowledge and experience, status, motivation, and attitudes. The team will also be affected by group and organizational characteristics and the nature and structure of the task (Bettenhausen, 1991). Given the international context of a transnational team, we distinguish three sources of heterogeneity that are

likely to be particularly relevant to transnational teams: differences in cultural values, local versus global perspective and power. These are not the only sources of heterogeneity that may affect the transnational team. Like other groups, the transnational team may be affected by individual and functional differences. However, in our discussion, we emphasize the cultural background of the team members, the local or global perspective each member brings to the team, and the resulting differences in power due to differences in culture, perspective, status and language as three interrelated sources of heterogeneity specific to transnational teams.

Cultural Values

Transnational team members bring their cultural differences to the group. These differences may include values as well as expectations and norms about what constitutes effective group structure, and appropriate communication, decision making and leadership styles (Canney Davison et al., 1995). Schneider (in press), for example, points out that team members who have a high tolerance for uncertainty may be comfortable with vaguely defined roles and responsibilities, while those who, because of their cultural background, prefer certainty may be very uncomfortable with vaguely defined roles and responsibilities. Cultural values may also impact on group members' preferences for how the group goes about making decisions. Group members from cultures that value independence (see Marcus and Kitayama, 1991 for a discussion of this cultural dimension) may see the group as having a mandate to make its own decisions. Group members from cultures that value interdependence may, in contrast, wish to consult and involve many non-group members in the decision making process, in order to ensure that the decision does not disrupt harmony within groups it may affect.

Local versus Global Perspectives

Besides different cultural backgrounds, team members may also bring a variety of different local perspectives to the team. Some, perhaps corporate headquarters' members, also may bring a global perspective to the team. Balancing the tension between forces for global integration and local responsiveness is an important strategic challenge for international companies (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Rosenzweig & Singh, 1991). It is a challenge as well for expatriate managers (Janssens, 1994). We expect this dilemma of integrating local and global perspectives to be present in teams as well. A transnational team whose goal is to design a new product, service, or policy that will be implemented in many different local units will face a similar dilemma of integrating local and global perspectives.

Power and Status

Associated with differences related to culture and local versus global perspectives are issues relating to power and status. There are really two aspects of the power/status issue: the differing cultural perspectives relating to what constitutes power and status and the status and power of each of the members of the team.

There is a fundamental cultural difference in the conceptualization of power that has been discussed by Hofstede (1980) as power-distance, and by Schwartz (1994) as hierarchy versus egalitarianism. In high power distance or hierarchical cultures, roles define peoples' status in the social network, specifying their duties, power, and privileges (Hwang, 1987). In low power-distance cultures, an individual whose role provides low status may nevertheless wield significant power, because of knowledge or expertise, or the ability to make connections, or even the force of his or her personality. Thus, differences in cultural background may cause members of a

transnational team to have different conceptualizations of power, and different interpretations of which team members are powerful.

Another factor contributing to power differences within the team is the status of each team member. Especially when team members are not previously acquainted, members initial status in the group may be a function of the status of their local organization and facility with the team's common language or lingua franca. Linguistic scholars (e.g. Toury, 1980; Lambert, 1994; Snell-Hornby, 1988) emphasize that power is very much intertwined with the use of language. The choice of the lingua franca is not a neutral decision but a way to decide which languages and therefore which team members will be intimately involved in the decision making process. Language will co-determine who belongs to the in-group and who does not. It is an illusion to believe in the equality of languages or in ethnolinguistic democracy (Fishman, 1993). Languages differ not only in their formal and linguistic features, they also differ with respect to prestige and power. The members' fluency with the language used for team transactions will therefore impact his or her capability to join and influence the internal team process. One study, examining relationships between language and group identity, in a sample of Afrikaans speakers in South Africa, showed that the relatively more powerful used language to impose their notion of group membership on the relatively less powerful (Louw-Potgeiter & Giles, 1987).

External and Internal Strategies of Transnational Teams

Teams can best be understood by the way they manage their external relations and internal processes (Sundstrom, de Meuse, & Futrell, 1990). Although research on groups has traditionally focused on internal processes, recent research has shown that external relations affect team success (Ancona, 1990; Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). An

outward focus is certainly important for transnational teams, whose task is to design a product or service, or identify cost savings that will need to be implemented in different organizational units in different geographical areas. Given this external orientation, transnational teams work with diverse information some of which stems from their own expertise and perspectives and other of which is gleaned from their outside contacts. Assuming a transnational team is able to accumulate the information needed to deal with its task, the challenge for the team is to manage its internal processes in a way that utilizes the heterogeneous information available to the team.

Previous research on groups (Bettenhausen, 1991; Turner, 1987) and transnational teams (Canney Davison et al., 1995) has identified different internal group processes: identification, polite stand-off, subgroup domination and interactive synergy. Each of these processes deals rather differently with issues of team heterogeneity.

In this section of the article, we review the literature on external strategies and team effectiveness and on the internal strategies of transnational teams. This overview of the literature provides a basis from which we generate our advice for developing an internal strategy of meaningful participation, the subject of the third section of the article.

External Strategies

Recent group research has taken an external perspective arguing that teams that manage their external dependencies and obtain critical resources from their environments are better performers than those that only manage their internal dynamics (Ancona, 1990; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In their research on new product teams, Ancona and her colleagues identified several different external strategies and

linked them to team performance. The highest performing teams were ones that combined both upward and lateral strategies. Such teams set ambassadorial activities, such as upward persuasion and lobbying for resources, together with task-coordination activities, such as lateral feedback seeking, and testing of solutions (Ancona, 1990; Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). Although ambassadorial activities seemed to be key to performance, their effect over the long term seemed to hold only in combination with lateral task-coordination activities. In contrast, low performing teams either paid too much or not enough attention to external activities. Teams that were involved in prolonged environmental scanning or external scouting and did not move beyond these information gathering activities typically failed to reach the stage of implementation. Teams that concentrated on internal team processes until they were ready to inform outsiders of their intentions, seemed to be the lowest performers of all. Such teams were too isolated from both their external task environment and top management to be judged to be successful by these constituencies (Ancona, 1990; Ancona & Caldwell, 1992).

The balance between internal and external activities depends on how much a team needs outside resources, information, or support (Ancona, 1990). Since every team will need support in order to implement its decisions, some degree of external activity is always required. The task of transnational teams - to design a product, service or organizational policy that will be implemented in units of the organization located in different geographical areas - may require more than minimal external activity. The needs and perspectives of the units that will be affected have to be taken into account. Otherwise, regardless of their innovativeness or elegance, the transnational teams' products, services or policies may not be implemented.

Given the task and the tension between local and global perspectives, we conclude that a well performing transnational team must be involved in both corporate-oriented ambassadorial and local-oriented task-coordinating activities. We turn next to the question of what is an optimal internal strategy for a transnational team.

Internal Strategies

The external orientation of a well performing transnational team implies that the team's internal processes must be sufficient to deal with the complex and conflicting information that members bring to the group (Homans, 1950). The multicultural composition of transnational teams means that internal group processes will need to manage conflict due to culture, local-global perspectives, and perceptions of power and status.

The groups' literature in social psychology has emphasized internal processes: how groups integrate diverse points of view and make decisions (e.g. Levine & Moreland, 1990; McGrath, 1984) and has extensively discussed the internal strategy of identification (e.g. Turner, 1987). Canney Davison and colleagues (1995), studying transnational teams have identified three different strategies by which these teams manage their internal processes: polite stand-off, subgroup domination, and interactive synergy. Each of these internal processes deals somewhat differently with the problem of managing the heterogeneity of culture, local-global perspectives and power perceptions likely to characterize a transnational team.

Identification. A first internal strategy is that of group integration and identification. Heterogeneous groups can generate strong in-group identification either through socialization activities or through manipulation of in-group out-group

distinctions (Turner, 1987). The risk, however, in such groups, is an over-emphasis on similarities and decision making that resembles group think. Identification may lead to a homogenization of internal differences and lack of learning or innovation. Identification may also lead to isolation from parties in the external environment or to discounting of their views. In either case, the implications of too much internal identification is unsuccessful implementation.

Polite stand-off. A second internal strategy is described by Canney Davison and her colleagues (1995) as a polite stand-off. In “polite stand-off” teams, members have not surfaced, much less learned to manage, their differences. They carry out their team work independently and ultimately lose task motivation and commitment to the group. In such groups, internal processes are underdeveloped and it is unlikely that the group will be able to reach decisions that respond creatively to the team’s task.

Subgroup domination. A third internal strategy is one in which a subgroup dominates the team’s internal (and external) process. A common situation which engenders this strategy is when the team has a national headquarters subgroup whose native language is also the group’s lingua franca (Canney Davison et al., 1995). The team’s internal processes, for example discussion and decision making, are likely to be governed by status differences. In contrast to the two previous internal strategies, this strategy deals with heterogeneity but only when it is important to members of the dominant subgroup. Dominant subgroups are likely to control external interactions and may engage in ambassadorial activities that serve to increase the subgroup’s own status, relative to that of other group members. When the subgroup is dominated by members from corporate headquarters, it may also stress a global perspective rather than taking into account the interests from the different local

units. In general, when subgroups dominate transnational teams, they set the scene, override differences that are not in line with their logic, and suppress other perspectives.

Interactive synergy. A fourth internal strategy is a one that allows a group to utilize the task relevant differences that members bring to the group. Canney Davison and her colleagues label this strategy interactive synergy. However, the label refers to the outcome more than the process. We view the process underlying interactive synergy as one of meaningful participation in which group members respect each other's expertise and differing cultural backgrounds and create a pattern of interaction that differentially involves group members as their knowledge, expertise or contacts become relevant to the group's task. Meaningful participation does not imply equal participation, but rather proportional contribution in which members defer to others based on expertise, knowledge, and contacts.

Meaningful participation allows for and may facilitate external activities of an upward, ambassadorial nature with top management, as well as lateral task coordination and communication with locals. The team's internal process which appreciates differences and provides a legitimate role for minority influence should further facilitate the team's use of the information it gleans from the external environment.

What Is Required to Support an Internal Strategy of Meaningful Participation?

An internal group strategy of meaningful participation may not occur naturally. Research on newly formed groups indicates that groups naturally turn to the task and begin working on it rather than spending time building relationships among group

members or discussing processes and norms (e.g. Hackman, 1990). Commentators and advisors seem to agree that newly formed groups should not simply delve into their task, but they differ on what they suggest groups should do. One approach tries to establish interpersonal relationships among group members before they begin working on the task (Canney Davison et al., 1995; O'Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1994). Another approach tries to establish role clarity and foster consistent role-based interaction rather than person-based interaction (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1966). Although we recognize strengths in both of these approaches, we suggest a third approach based on stakeholders' theory. After developing this approach we discuss how it may be used to deal with three sources of heterogeneity in transnational teams: cultural differences, differences in local-global perspectives, and power differences.

A Relational Approach to Group Development

Studies of transnational teams stress building relationships among group members in order to overcome cultural differences that may interfere in the development of an internal strategy such as meaningful participation. Both Canney Davison and colleagues (1995), and O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) emphasize the importance of working first on the relationship and then on the task. They advise to start slowly and end fast, instead of start fast and maybe not end at all. O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994), in their conceptual model of global team building, propose exploring cultural and personal differences before talking about roles. The models' first two stages, orientation and building trust, focus on the questions: "why are we here?" and "who are we?" Cultural information about group members, i.e., "who are we" is viewed as critical for building trust. In discussing the "who are we" question, explicitness is a virtue. Only after this degree of personal

disclosure, should the group move to stage 3 of the model: goal and role clarification; address the question, “what am I responsible for?” and define boundaries around roles and responsibilities. In general, these authors’ advice is always directed toward building human connectivity and thereby building cohesion and a positive group dynamic. For example, in order to maintain group identity and overcome the ‘out of sight, out of mind’ phenomenon, these authors propose simple, low tech, but personal, strategies such as creating a team metaphor, putting a map with personal information about each member on the wall, having collages of pictures of each other’s offices, etc. O’Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) also caution against reliance on cultural stereotypes. They suggest that treating group members as representatives of cultural groups devalues their own unique life experience. Instead of using categorical information, these authors recommend making cultural differences explicit and personal and building relationships that transcend these differences.

The risk in such an approach is that the internal strategy that emerges is identification, not meaningful interaction. The focus on relationships may encourage the development of a group culture that homogenizes differences in order to maintain relationships.

A Role Approach to Group Development

In their discussion of newly formed teams, Meyerson, Weick and Kramer (1996) argue that one way to foster the development of internal strategies for interaction is to reduce members’ vulnerability by establishing role clarity. They point out that when roles are clear, members deal with one another as role incumbents rather than as individuals. Role clarity makes interactions more standardized and more focused on tasks and expertise. Meyerson and her colleagues (1996) also note that

role descriptions largely exclude expectations of ill will and highlight instead contributions further encouraging task-based rather than person-based interaction. In contrast to O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) who warn against reliance on stereotypes, Meyerson and colleagues (1996) suggest that greater reliance on category-driven information such as cultural stereotypes, and industry recipes, leads to faster reduction of uncertainty, though they admit that when stereotypes prove wrong, the groups may have significant work to do to re-establish trust and a working relationship.

The Meyerson et al., 1996 approach reflects what groups do naturally: jump into the task relying on imported procedural norms for decision making, and stereotypes for dealing with individual differences. The risk in this approach is the development of a subgroup-dominated strategy rather than meaningful participation. Furthermore, if a subgroup does not emerge, multicultural groups like transnational teams whose members are importing clashing stereotypes of selves and others and inconsistent procedural norms may find that their internal strategies are chaotic and a polite stand-off may be the most to hope for from such a group.

A Stakeholders Approach to Group Development

We suggest a stakeholders approach for developing trust in transnational teams that focuses upon respect for the interests and stakes of other team members. The development of interpersonal trust is probably a necessary condition if transnational teams are to be managed with an internal strategy of meaningful participation. When transnational teams first come together whatever trust there is, is *ex ante* (Meyerson et al., 1996). There are two bases for *ex ante* trust: identification and stereotyping. Neither, we argue, is conducive to developing meaningful participation as the team's

internal strategy. Furthermore, trust developed via identification or stereotyping may actually work against the development of meaningful participation. In contrast, whereas trust developed via adaptation of an ethical norm of behavior and respectful treatment of all members may facilitate the development of meaningful participation.

Reasoning based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979; Turner, 1987) suggests that *ex ante* trust may be based on team members self categorization as members of the transnational team. This team identification may be fostered by socialization activities that help group members get acquainted and any special status, for example business class plane fare, resort hotel or computer software conferred on the group and not available to organizational members as a whole. With group identification, trust may become depersonalized (Sheppard and Tutchinsky, 1996). Group preferences prevail and group members become interchangeable in that all may be counted on to represent a common group orientation. This type of trust would characterize the relational approach to group development. However, such an orientation emphasizes similarities and depresses differences and therefore would work against the development of meaningful participation in which differences are aired and discussed. In addition, a high level of group identification is likely to encourage in-group biases and stereotyping of out-groups. This may lead to closing off interactions with out-groups, thereby reducing task-coordination or ambassadorial activities, or at the very least, the serious biasing information transmitted to or received from out-groups. Trust based on group identity may be useful in facilitating rapid development of a working relationship among transnational team members. However, it does not seem conducive to either the development of effective external strategies, or of an internal strategy of meaningful participation.

Reasoning based on the theory of stereotyping (e.g. Nisbett & Ross, 1985) suggests that ex ante trust in transnational teams may be based on a different sort of categorization process: stereotyping. When trust is based on stereotyping, both the judgments of who is trustworthy and the reasoning for why will vary among group members. Team members from hierarchical cultures, for example, may rely on status norms for ex ante trust. In hierarchical cultures along with status comes responsibility to care for and consider the interests of lower status persons. Team members from egalitarian cultures may rely on other cultural stereotypes, for example, the norm of reciprocity (people who do not reciprocate information are not trustworthy). This stereotypical orientation reflects the role approach to group development. Here, trust emphasizes differences among group members and provides no basis for integration of those differences. Indeed, it seems more likely to foster a subgroup dominated internal strategy than one in which meaningful participation occurs.

Since ex ante trust based upon identification and stereotyping does not facilitate an internal strategy of meaningful participation, it may be necessary to intervene in transnational teams and not leave the development of trust to natural processes of identification and stereotyping. We suggest an intervention based on the principles of stakeholder theory. According to stakeholder theory, the corporation should be managed for the benefit of its different stakeholders. The basic idea is Kantian, all stakeholders have the right not to be treated as a means to some end and therefore must participate, in some sense, in decisions that substantially affect their welfare (Evan & Freeman, 1993). The role of management is to recognize the multiple claims of the conflicting stakeholders and to keep the relationships among stakeholders in balance. Stakeholder theory does not give primacy to one stakeholder group over another, though there will surely be times when one group will benefit at

the expense of others. Central to this theory is the application of Kant's dictum, "treat persons as ends unto themselves" which is the sign of respectful treatment. From this ethical perspective, trust is "the reliance by one person, group or firm upon a voluntarily accepted duty on the part of another person, group or firm to recognize and protect the rights and interests of all others engaged in a joint endeavor or economic exchange" (Hosmer, 1995, p. 393). The philosophy of stakeholder theory applied to the context of transnational teams implies that no team member's or constituency's interests should take primacy over another a priori. The stakeholder norm requires that team members take into account the interests and stakes of other members. Thus, the norm, when universally adopted, provides a basis for trust and all group members will be expected to follow the norm. At the same time, the norm recognizes the inevitability of differences and respects them. While preserving differences, the norm also should facilitate the team's ability to integrate them. Trust based on respect implies a cooperative orientation and cooperative groups in which trust is high are better able to integrate differences and reach high quality decisions than groups that lack trust and are not cooperatively oriented (Weingart, Bennett, & Brett, 1993). Furthermore, as the norm is applied it will be self-reinforcing and should increase the overall level of trust within the group.

The test of the utility of the stakeholders' approach is whether it can successfully deal with the three specific sources of heterogeneity in transnational teams. We turn next to a discussion of the stakeholder approach to deal with cultural differences, local and global perspectives and power differences that may be essential for meaningful participation.

Cultural values. When cultural differences themselves are the focus of conversation, it's very easy to fall into the trap of stereotyping. For instance,

discussing team members' preferred ways of communicating, without a context in which to anchor the discussion, is likely to lead to general statements such as 'the Belgians never say what they really think' or 'the Americans are so informal, they never show respect'. Such category-based statements encourage stereotyping which, in turn, inhibits the development of a process of meaningful participation.

Stereotyping does not foster respect, because it treats individuals as 'tokens' or representatives of a larger group and de-personalizes interactions and relationships.

We therefore favor addressing cultural differences via explicit discussion in the context of group processes. As the group begins using its processes, and members experience difficulties in working together, they will have context specific opportunities to deal with their cultural differences. In doing so, it may be appropriate to surface stereotypes in a personal way. For example, one group member may ask another whether concerns about status and appropriateness of contribution was why expected information was not shared with the group. In this way, cultural differences are only made explicit in the context in which the group is working. Discussing stereotypes in a context-specific setting may help to surface differences in a way that actually helps the group break down stereotypes and develop a clearer understanding of a member's unique expertise. We think that this context-specific approach to dealing with cultural differences is more likely to support the development of an internal strategy of meaningful participation than either the pure relational or the role approaches.

Local-global perspectives. Meaningful participation is a process that does not utilize all members' input equally at all times, but involves group members when their knowledge, expertise, or contacts become relevant to the groups' task. At the outset, members of a transnational team are unlikely to know in what ways other

members are knowledgeable, expert, or have contacts. So, another problem that the group must deal with is what knowledge, expertise, and contacts are shared among group members and what members can contribute uniquely to the group. Social psychological research on group decision making has identified a Common Knowledge Effect, or a tendency to overemphasize the common knowledge members share and to underemphasize the unique knowledge to which only one member has access. This tendency to disregard uniquely-held information occurs because group members tend to aggregate their individual responses (for instance majority rules) rather than to discuss disconfirming or unique evidence (Gigone & Hastie, 1993). Factors that seem to impact the common knowledge effect are interpersonal knowledge and social uncertainty (Gruenfeld et al., 1996).

‘Meta-knowledge,’ or knowledge of who has what skills, knowledge, and contacts, facilitates the sharing of unique information (Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996). Therefore, as their task interaction, develops, transnational teams must invest time in developing ‘meta-knowledge’ with respect to which members know what. This meta-knowledge of where knowledge resides in the team should facilitate the use of specialized information.

Another factor that may increase the common knowledge effect is social uncertainty, or group members’ concerns with social acceptance. As a result of social uncertainty, group members may be reluctant to share or discuss information that provides a different or inconsistent perspective on what has been previously discussed. A transnational team may avoid this conformity trap by setting an a priori norm of commitment to hearing multiple perspectives. The group may also put into place structures such as those suggested to minimize the effects of groupthink (Janis, 1971). For example, the Body Shop has a ‘hard’ rule that governs every meeting. The

rule is that if conversations become heated, people make a circle so no rank exists and pass a 'talking stick' to each other so everyone is listened to. It's a 'hard' rule meaning it is being used with no exceptions.

A third factor that may affect the ability of team members to participate meaningfully in decision making is language. Special attention should be paid to the intertwinedness of language and participation. When language prohibits the full participation of some members, the team may decide that each team member will speak in his or her own language if s/he feels a need for it. Translation can be done by other team members or a professional interpreter. Whatever the solution, the language issue needs to be addressed. The group should not rule out that different approaches to language may be needed to address particular aspects of the task. For example, in dealing with technical aspects of the task, the group may be able to use a common language, but when turning to implementation, members may be better able to express themselves by using their own language.

Power differences. Ultimately, the process of integrating differences to reach group decisions rests on power and how the groups uses it. Norms of trust based on respect, and participation based on expertise contribute to preserving heterogeneity in the group and facilitate the integration of those differences, but they may not be sufficient for the group to reach decisions. For this groups need decision rules that members are aware of, agree to, and that hopefully preserve the heterogeneity of their inputs to the extent possible.

These decision rules should be explicitly discussed by the group and not left to evolution. It is very likely that different members of transnational teams may be used to working with different decision rules. If they import different rules into the team, it may be impossible to reach any decision at all (e.g. a polite stand off). If

status differences are great within the group, high status members may expect to dominate group decision making. This sub-group dominated form of decision making is not consistent with meaningful participation, since the subgroup may not give adequate attention to the interests of the less powerful members.

An important criterion in deciding which decision rule to implement is cultural appropriateness. For example, although members from egalitarian cultures may be used to discussing options among team members until a consensus is reached, members from hierarchical cultures may be used to discussing options with higher-level non-team members until the higher-level managers' preferences are clear. Yet, members from egalitarian cultures may view prolonged discussion with outsiders as vacating their duty as a team. A team that surfaces such decision making differences may design an all encompassing decision making rule. For example, the team may decide that preliminary internal consensus should be followed by external consensus, followed by final internal consensus, or some other pattern that mixes internal and external consensus. Since meaningful participation within the context of transnational teams requires involving people from different cultures in the decision making process, the group's decision rules need to respect cultural preferences.

Whatever the team decides as to the process by which decisions are to be made, before a decision is finalized there should be a generous majority for the option and those in the minority should be willing to go along with the decision, if not totally in agreement with it. Avoidance of a simple majority rule or decisions dominated by a single powerful person or a small subgroup is essential if the heterogeneity of information gathered by the group is to be used to its fullest extent.

Conclusion

Meaningful participation in transnational teams is an internal process which appreciates differences and involves team members when their knowledge, expertise and contacts are relevant to the team's task. In our recommendations of ways to support this internal process, we rely on the philosophy of stakeholders theory arguing that no team member's interests should take primacy over another a priori. With this ethical norm, trust should develop because team members should feel they are being respected as persons. Consistent with this approach, we propose ways of dealing with cultural differences, local and global perspectives, and power and status differences that reflect respectful interpersonal treatment. Discussing cultural differences in a context-specific setting may help to surface differences in a personal rather than stereotypical way. Awareness of which members know what, prior commitment to hearing multiple perspectives, and structure ensuring the multiplicity of viewpoints get heard may help the team to discover both common and unique information and knowledge. Finally, the team will have to implement a decision rule to help them integrate their differences.

While writing these recommendations, we have tried to avoid imposing a Western view on the management of transnational teams. However, we recognize that our fundamental theoretical approach, stakeholders' analysis, itself is a very Western view on how to acknowledge differences. Yet, we have tried to demonstrate how this approach can be utilized with respect to the norms and values of other cultures. Fundamentally, we believe that processes need to be developed to support the generation and then integration of the diverse points of view and approaches that are needed to make high quality decisions about complex global issues. Meaningful participation has the potential to be such a process.

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¹ The process of meaningful participation is not limited to Western conceptions of participation. Meaningful participation embraces Eastern conceptions of decision making, for example the Japanese *ringi kessai*, or decision making by consensus. Meaningful participation charges group members explicitly with bringing to the group concerns of their external constituencies and involving external constituencies in the group decision making process. Meaningful participation also prevents the motivational problems of an advisory form of group decision making in which a superior chooses among the ideas and options generated by the group (Vroom & Yetton, 19). Transnational project teams by definition will likely need to be involved in implementation. Thus, when teams do not participate in decision making, team members from cultures that value participation are likely to have less motivation for implementation than team members whose cultures are more accepting of hierarchical decision making.