

Global working

Rotation to India experience (Aug 08 – Nov 08)

Gwenaëlle de Borne de Grandpre, Novartis Pharma AG, Basel, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Technological development has made today's global business environment possible while each culture and people's minds haven't changed as rapidly as technology. A three months rotation experience in managing a team of programmers in India. Highlights of some characteristics of Indian people's behavior, working style and thinking might provide some keys for operating a global business efficiently and successfully.

INTRODUCTION

I stayed in India for 3 month in 2008 to fill a management gap in the cardiovascular and Metabolism (CVM) area. My role was to take over a colleague who initiated management support in a similar 4 months visit. It also included working alongside the recently nominated CVM therapeutic area coordinator to manage the portfolio. Another goal was to train and develop staff alongside India management team.

CHALLENGES

ARRIVE IN A TEAM THAT IS NOT FEELING COMFORTABLE WITH HEADQUARTER

The team was feeling anxious about my arrival. My desk had to be on the side and not in the middle of the group.

UNDERSTAND THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

- Importance of the family
- What does "yes" exactly mean?
- The body language means a lot and reading body language takes some time.
- Multicultural differences within India itself is big. India is such a big country that from one region to the other they may not understand each other. There are also different of habits and religions across the country.

SETTLE IN THE TEAM AND GET TO KNOW THE INDIVIDUALS

- The stability of the team was disturbed as the team had settled with the previous colleague for the past 4 months and it was changing again.
- It takes time to get to know each person, there was 13 members at the start of my stay.
- Another challenge when joining a team is to be accepted and gain the necessary credibility so that they follow you (like for any team I would say).

CARDIOVASCULAR AND METABOLISM (CVM) PROJECTS

Get the knowledge of the different projects and studies. Before going to India, I was a project programmer and in charge of one project within the therapeutic area. Working in India, I had to get the knowledge of all CVM projects. The biggest challenge was probably personal in accepting the different project setups and ways of dealing with the data. Being exposed to all CVM project, I had to be accepted by global colleagues as well as the local ones.

MY OWN PROJECT TO DEAL WITH AT THE SAME TIME

At the time, my own project was under very high pressure (Health Authority request) and my backup was not available before October. At the same time, another CVM project led in the US was facing urgent Health Authority Questions.

TEAM

- The mean age is low and around 25 years. This element has to be taken into account because we expect Indian colleagues to perform as good as experienced folks without having the experience.
- There was 4 new hires which represents 30% of new members. It was key to re-enforce the team. Part of this was to shift people to the right teams depending on their experience and personality.
- As the team was growing, a major goal was to put in place project team leaders (which was initiated) and to define and strengthen their role. Training, support and follow up of the project leaders was required.

WHAT WENT WELL

The India team was very welcoming and opened. They quickly accepted me.

Understanding of the therapeutic area's priorities. One document in particular was key in doing this. The way Novartis works with the Indian colleagues is in assigning them tasks which are stored into a document. The use of this document had to be extended in order to have a clear picture of the tasks with their respective timelines on a monthly basis. We worked on making this document become a living document and up to date. Communication within the global CVM managers team through team meeting helped a lot.

Continued the work on establishing the local project leaders

- Monthly TC with Project Programmer involving Indian Project leader
- Weekly meeting within each project team in India.
- A spreadsheet for project planning was put in place and had to be maintained by India project lead. When I left this was still fragile and had to be strengthened. Planning is not part of the Indian way of life. It is not part of the culture, they live on a daily basis, so they really have to force themselves into this planning.

Upfront planning was a success and team understood the importance of it.

- Diovan® programming work was ahead of schedule which made it possible for programmers to deal with the submission which was, in the end, brought forward.
- SPA submission: India team was being proactive in requesting the data early in order to start as earlier as possible.

The Indian people are hard workers. They are very much dedicated and willing to do a good job. They will work long hours whenever needed. Some of them (especially before they get married) may also stay late, even if not absolutely necessary. It is a way of socializing. They can have their dinner at work, snack bar still open at that time and then go back to their desk to work.

The "Fear" of global people has gone down! Being close to them and knowing each other a bit more every day, they realised that I was simply a human being who was caring for them as much as they cared for me. Mutual respect was established.

One day near the end of my stay, someone said: "I now feel part of the global team". This simple sentence gave me so much emotions. I was there! My goal was reached!

I am conscious this is a small victory but I understood I was going in the right direction.

I believe Indian people (especially at that age) need very much attention and "mothering" relationship possibly due to the way they are raised and educated.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED?

As said earlier, Indian people are hard worker but they could reduce the amount of time spent at work

- By increasing their efficiency and focus
- By taking more ownership of the task assigned
- By having a clear understanding that planning is key and has to be adhered to it on a regular basis.

The time difference is an issue for urgent requests especially with the US. There is very little working time in common. So it is key that sufficient turn around is allowed to review and implement the change.

Communication from India

- More accurate description of understanding should be showed when asking a question
- Closed questions are required (yes/no answer from Headquarter)
- Reading email several times before sending out to ensure clarity
- Deep reading of the email to ensure understanding before starting the work.

Communication can be improved in some project especially for urgent tasks:

When an urgent request comes to India, Headquarter should ensure :

- It has been discussed between the programmer and the statistician.
- The specifications are clear and final.
- The area to work on is clearly defined.
- The titles, footnotes, program names, output numbers are provided.
- Which tracking sheet to use.
- Populations are clearly defined.
- Validation level of the outputs are provided.
- Validation done in India or Headquarter is specified

- Need to keep one day turn around after India delivers outputs to allow implementation of comments. Especially when working with US.
- When working with US, a Basel contact should be identified to answer questions (ideally both a Statistician and Programmer).

WORK PACKAGE: SOME THOUGHT IN CASE THIS WAY OF WORKING IS USED

Sets of tasks (mainly safety) are sent to India so that they can take ownership and be responsible of their work. Headquarter does acceptance checks to assess quality.

Remote locations can increase risk of barriers forming, and, in the worst case, people working against, not with, each other.

- Work package if not appropriately handled can exaggerate this.
- Work package does not prohibit communication.
- Important early on to ensure expectations clear, that India associates have the opportunity to be involved.

It should be clear that Headquarter doesn't get rid of the work when it is work packaged.

India has to understand that Headquarter can ask for the status of the programming work.

CONCLUSION

It was a great experience that brought me a lot personally but also work wise. Coming back to Basel, the way to work with India was obvious and suddenly became very easy and straight forward.

The key to this is building relationships with the India team.

Communication and "caring" play a major role.

Defining expectations and providing guidance is key

If opportunities to meet face to face are not possible, then adopting strategies to meet by video. It can greatly enhance trust and team work, especially for kick offs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Roy Ward, Florence Buchheit, Gargi Paigaonkar and the entire team in India.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Gwenaëlle de Borne de Grandpre

Novartis Pharma AG

Basel, Switzerland

Work Phone: +41 61 32 40 872

Email: gwenaëlle.de_borne_de_grandpre@novartis.com

Web : www.novartis.com

Brand and product names are trademarks of their respective companies.