The Importance of Cultural Sensitivity in MSP Implementation

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Miami or Bangkok, New York or Singapore, today it does not matter where we work, we are all a part of a global network (real or virtual), where success requires us to navigate through different cultures. Unless we are able to empathize with people coming from other cultures and see the world from their eyes, we are bound to trip and have misunderstandings and conflicts, which will ultimately lead to failure. This is especially relevant in the context of Managed Services Programs (MSPs) global expansions where we can have Hiring Managers in the UK, the Vendor Management System (VMS) Project Managers based out of the US along with the client leadership teams, and Software Engineers supporting the integration based in India, and all of them coming together to implement a MSP solution in Australia.

A global expansion or an international implementation of an MSP requires coordination of many stakeholders.
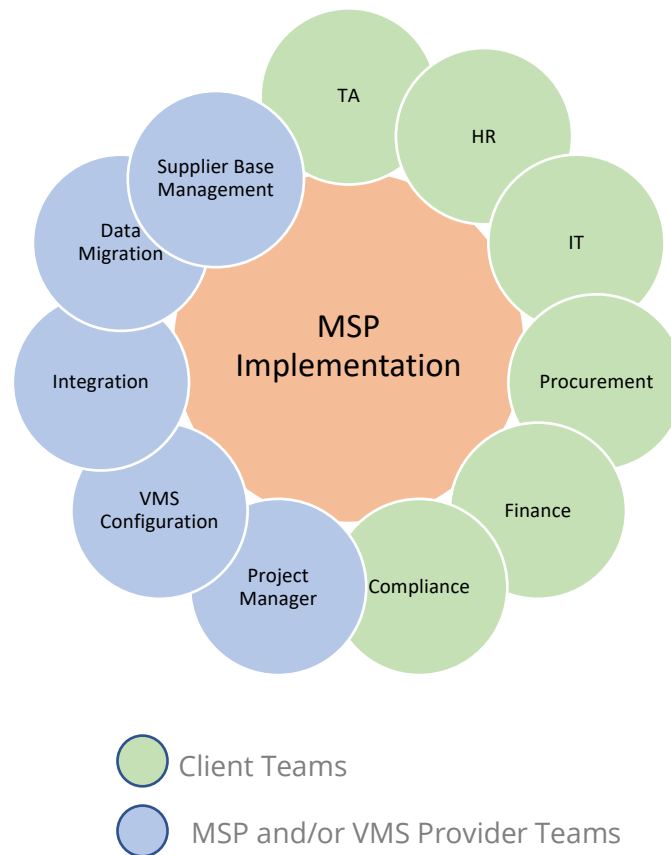
Here is a list of some of the areas that one needs to pay attention to in particular, for being able to effective in dealing with and managing international teams and operations:

High Context Vs. Low Context

Skills required to be an effective communicator in different languages vary quite bit from one culture to another. In the United States and other Anglo-Saxon cultures, people generally communicate as clearly and precisely as possible, where as in many Asian cultures like India and China, messages can be quite implicit, requiring the listener to read between the lines. In low context cultures, like the United States, messages must be as simple and explicit for it to be understood, and most communicators follow this trend. In High Context cultures like Japan for instance, people depend upon assumption about others experiences and shared backgrounds to communicate, value traditions a lot more, be non-confrontational and indirect. Given the global natures of teams today, it is better to be as explicit in one's communication to all concerned and explain the situation to the different stakeholders coming from High Context cultures about why a "Direct" type of communication will be more suited to this scenario.

Persuasion

Without being able to persuade others to support your ideas, it will be very difficult to get anything done. In certain Asian cultures, like India for example, a top down approach works very well; where the boss tells her team members what to and after a little bit of back and forth, the teams tend to get down to business. But in Germany, persuasion requires a logical case to built together to get everyone on board, whereas in the United States, we see a preference of stating what we think should be the answer first before sharing the reasons as to why.

Time Travel

Studying and working in the United States and the UK, I found that there is a 'Linear-Time' relationship, where by people in general make the effort to be on time for meetings and appointments. In places like Italy and France, being a few minutes late, is considered basically on time. And if you are in India, the Middle-east, Africa or South America, time can have a different type of elasticity in your mind altogether. While holding weekly update calls or meetings, it helps to remind the various stakeholders about the importance of respecting the time being invested by all concerned.

Negotiating with the Supplier Base

An MSP, unless it has a direct sourcing model, has a number of suppliers who provide the contingent talent. In the United States, I find that most suppliers work as partners and negotiations with them are usually based on the supplier's capability to deliver what the client needs, but there is a problem of plenty which hundreds of suppliers being available across the board. In Asian countries, I found the suppliers to be more passive partners in a relationship, over promising and under delivering often. In Europe, most suppliers tend to be niche players with a strong focus in one or two areas, and usually have had a relationship with the client that goes back to the dark ages, hence the negotiations can be a bit tricky.

Downtime

In most Anglo-Saxon countries, usually the period from the middle of December till about the first week of January, a lot of people are on vacation and this downtime is usually planned for. Similarly, in India, there are the couple of weeks around Diwali, in China there is the Chinese New Year, and in Europe, most of August: times when people are not going to be available, and even if they are, it might not be out of choice. It helps greatly in planning international activities keeping these in mind. It does narrow down the time available for some activities but does ensure that global stakeholders are available when needed.

Power Distance

Most people around the world say that they prefer an egalitarian style of work, but reality can be quite different. But when people start managing cross culturally, the day to day workings can reveal quite a different pattern. Geert Hofstede, developed the term "Power-Distance", after analyzing 100000 surveys at IBM in 70s. He defined "Power Distance" as: "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally". In certain European countries like Denmark, it is usual for everyone to have a voice in the meetings, including interns and admins. East Asian countries like China and South Korea tend to have a patriarchal culture, which translates in the workplace where "Boss knows best". Similarly, in India, it is rare for the boss to be challenged, and team members tend to look up them for advice and directions. The US and the UK are usually egalitarian in nature, until there is an urgent issue and then we can perhaps have a top-down approach with the team quickly trying to what the boss dictates, which can be a good mix when action is the need of the hour. One must be

careful how their behavior will be interpreted, otherwise international team members can inadvertently pick up the wrong signal, and we can have disastrous results.

In order to be successful in global implementations, leaders have to not only be able to understand human nature and personality differences, but also need to be able to differentiate whether the differences are national, cultural or personality driven. Everyone deals with an array of networks in different shapes and forms and has to be able to navigate them, to be effective globally and work with clients, suppliers, colleagues and partners from around the world. It can be quite challenging and rewarding at the same time – endless source of surprises and learning that never ends.

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