Lessons Learned as a SAS® Programming Lead Across Cultures
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ABSTRACT
Business practices that are the norm in one country may not be normal business practices when dealing with international partners. This paper will compare and contrast experiences with two global groups and share lessons learned on how to effectively communicate, motivate, give feedback, and resolve conflicts. The goal of this paper is to enhance your effectiveness in working with global partners.

INTRODUCTION
Many people have been thrust into the world of international business with little or no training on how to interact with different cultures. Cultural differences can be a stumbling block impacting business relationships, and it is seldom addressed. As the statistical programming analyst lead for some outsourced studies, I had the opportunity to work with two foreign cultures that I will hereafter refer to as Culture A and Culture B. After experiencing some challenges in dealing with Culture A and Culture B, I sought to understand our cultural differences and my role in developing a productive cross-cultural business relationship.

CULTURE
Culture in this paper will be defined as the capacity of an individual to communicate and collaborate as influenced by their ethnicity or geographic location. Both of the groups mentioned above understood the importance of timelines. While Culture A sought clarification during teleconferences, Culture B would rarely do so and preferred to follow-up through email. The latter approach had the potential of negatively impacting time effectiveness due to time-zone differences. Further, Culture B was polite and respectful, while Culture A was mistaken for being overly aggressive which was not their intention.

COMMUNICATION RESOLUTION
Meetings
In order to optimize meetings, all business meeting material should be sent several days before the meeting. Each participant should be requested to read the material before the meeting and ask questions during the meeting. Maintain a data questions case log in a central location where either party can open a question for the other to answer. If the question is answered and both parties are satisfied, close that case log. The meeting agenda should have a section for each group and role so as to address their pending questions and concerns. Minutes are to be taken and archived in a central location.
**Instant Messaging (IM)**

Instant messaging communication with foreign partners saves time. IM makes it easy to answer quick questions even when in another meeting, enabling members to proceed with their work without having to wait for an answer.

**Email**

Keep all stakeholders in the loop. Archive any important communications for future referencing.

**RACI** (Responsible, Accountable, Contacted, Informed)

Discuss each person's roles and responsibilities in the business process, and make sure they understand their tasks. The RACI matrix defines each person's role.

**MOTIVATION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Treat your partners as part of the team and let them feel and know that they have a stake in the success of the study. Be generous with your gratitude when they meet or exceed expectation. Be professional in your communication of areas that may need improvement. When a partner asks a question or makes a statement that is at risk of being misinterpreted, paraphrase their statements to make sure everyone understands. It is important to withhold judgment and equally as important to be patient. If you have a concern with individuals, it is not necessary to broadcast it. If there are unresolved conflicts, leverage the experience of other lead programmers who have had the same experience; if this does not work, escalate your concerns to your manager.

**TIMELINES**

It is critical that both parties answer questions as soon as possible as even a small delay can translate into a couple of days delay due to time differences. Maintain a document with study timelines of major milestones such as LPLV (Last Patient Last Visit), Data Base Lock, ERM (Early Results Memo) and CSR (Clinical Study Report). These timelines should be reviewed at every meeting and any possible risks discussed.

**CENTRAL DOCUMENT LOCATION**

To ensure the team always refers to the same document, keep all current versions of the protocol, SAP (Statistical Analysis Plan), Mapping Specifications, Define.xls and eCRF (Electronic Case Report Forms) TLF (Tables, Listings and Figures) specifications, templates, and RACI matrix in one central location.

**COMPETENCY AND SKILL LEVEL**

In order to prevent requests for additional resources late in the study, it is important to evaluate the skill and competency level of partners before the commencement of analysis.
and reporting. An example of this would be when a partner requests to have the sponsor review their programs in order to increase their confidence level in the results.

**TIME OUT**
Because teams are impacted by holidays over multiple geographical locations, team members should keep their calendars updated with national holidays and provide a list of the same to team members. Whenever possible, team members should populate their calendars with their planned vacations. Observing these precautions will minimize resource issues and preserve the timelines.

**TRAINING**
Training in SOP (Standard Operating Procedures) and other business processes
If an SOP approved by the sponsor is not in place, it is important that the partner receives training in the sponsor's SOP and is given an opportunity to ask questions. It is especially important that the operational definition of the SOP is interpreted the same way by everyone. The sponsor may, from time to time, go beyond the requirements of the SOP, making it necessary for the sponsor to share common desired practices that may not be documented in the SOP. An example of this would be performing parallel programming to ADaM (Analysis Data Model) datasets. This is a practice that is not a requirement of the SOP, but if done, gives a high degree of confidence in the quality of the data.

**REQUEST AND PROVIDE BUSINESS PARTNER FEEDBACK**
Following is an example of how to give feedback in a way that does not target or blame individuals:

*What Went Well*
- Open communication and documentation of meeting deliberations
- Timelines met

*Areas for Improvement*
- Better assessment of partner experience level in order to allow the timely allocation of additional resources needed from sponsor. Such resources are to be included in the RACI
- Provide partner proper access to sponsor to avoid delays in providing access to programming share drive
- Standardize the expectation of a partner folder structure and access levels
- Re-visit RACI requirement for partner to attend pre-lock meeting. This does not work due to time differences, and this role is carried out by the domestic programmer
VALIDATING PARTNER DELIVERABLE
The approach here is to trust but verify. Specifications that are well written and understood have a high probability of resulting in good quality data. It should be sufficient to check critical data such as ADSL (ADaM Subject Level) and ADEFF (ADaM Efficacy) and reports for primary and important secondary endpoints. To avoid misunderstanding and confusion, the sponsor should share existing code and macros.

CONCLUSION
In order to collaborate across cultures, an atmosphere of trust must be in place. Team members need to be patient and maintain a high degree of professional participation when working cross-culturally. Cross-cultural training is highly recommended. In the absence of cross-cultural training, people from different cultures should learn the culture of the sponsor. The sponsor should provide a set of shared practices, behaviors, values, and goals to be adopted across their global business.

Encourage meeting participants to speak up and to ask questions. It is preferable that you ask for clarification in a meeting where all the stakeholders are gathered. Do not be embarrassed if you do not understand something as you are probably not the only person at the meeting with questions for clarification. It is a positive thing to ask for clarification and should be encouraged.

The sponsor needs to ensure that the partner feels and knows they have a stake in the success of the project. For successful business partnership, it is important to know who your customer is and to figure out how to meet or even exceed their expectations. If a customer asks a partner to go above the requirements of an SOP to ensure high quality, it would behoove the partner to satisfy the customer. Remember - the customer is always right.

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