

Cross-linking the Human Polymer Network at a Global Chemical Company

By [Scrappy Kimberly Wiefling](#), Global Leadership and Business Management Consultant, Wiefling Consulting, Inc.

UPDATED: April 22, 2015

[impossible projects](#)

[global company](#)

[team transformation](#)

[employee engagement](#)

Summary

I've been facilitating groups of about 20 people from roughly a half dozen countries who meet for 3 separate weeks over a 6-month period. Each time we meet on a different continent. When they arrive they are strangers from different cultures. The only thing in common is they work for the same company, and they have an idea of how to transform their company to become truly global. By the end of the 6 months they've completed five "impossible" team projects and presented them in wildly creative ways to their executives. The audience is transformed by their presentations, these strangers have become family, and the power of their deep relationships exceeds any positional power in their organization. It's thrilling!

Moonshots

[Expand the scope of employee autonomy](#)

[Create internal markets for ideas, talent & resources](#)

[Retool management for an open and borderless world](#)

Context

ALC Education's "Global Leadership and Talent Development" Group is a Tokyo-based company of about 300 people with connections to Silicon Valley consultants through Kimberly Wiefling of Wiefling Consulting. About 8 years ago Kimberly partnered with Yuko Shibata, the only female executive at ALC, to create a transformative program to support the globalization of Japanese multi-national companies through creating global leaders - mid-level managers who would "Lead From Any Chair", regardless of position or title. ALC has been in business for over 20 years, and mostly had been focusing on teaching business English and business skills in English. When they realized that committed leadership at every level and effective communication - not English - was the key to globalization, they started sending groups to Silicon Valley for 2-week intensive experiences. When Yuko met Kimberly their business exploded into a global venture, working with people from over 20 different countries, in locations on 4 different continents with powerful results, including a 100% recommendation for continuing these programs from alumni, and testimonials that this is the "best leadership program I've ever attended" from many participants, including converted cynics.

Triggers

Japan is the #2 consumer economy, the #3 economy by total GDP, and #4 exporter by value of goods. In spite of a population of only about 135 million people, Japan is vital to the economic wellbeing of our world. Now the population in Japan is flat/declining, and business growth must come from outside of Japan. In addition, there is a shortage of workers suited to work abroad, therefore there are strong pressures to include non-Japanese staff in meaningful leadership roles in overseas locations, and even inside of Japan. Multi-national Japanese companies have an imperative to globalize! For that they need leaders who can work across borders and boundaries of every kind. The barriers to global team success have been well documented by researchers at MIT. #1 is failure to build trust, #2 is failure to overcome communication barriers, #3 is lack of clear goals, and #4 is team goals misaligned

with individual goals. The first two cannot be resolved via hierarchical power and command and control techniques. The solution is to build relationships and power structures that transcend the corporate organization chart and make the existing hierarchical power structure less relevant, thus speeding decision-making and improving employee engagement and global team effectiveness.

Key Innovations & Timeline

In the client that we've been working with the longest, here's the timeline:

2007 First cohort of people began their 6-month "generative action learning journey".

- The "Global HR" department in Tokyo assigned teams of 4-5 people each.
- The teams had to agree on an idea that all team members would work on.

Every 9 months or so since then we've completed another cohort.

2009 Having built trust with Tokyo HR, we gained agreement that the participants would "self-organize" into teams, rather than being assigned by HR, using a "World Cafe" style "Idea Marketplace".

Each year we see noticeable shifts in the company culture as the executives in the audience were transformed by their experience of the incredibly creative and bold team project presentations. These presentations often included costumes, skits, audience participation, and other novel approaches to communicating their recommendations for organizational changes in support of globalization.

In addition, graduates of this program have formed strong bonds across cohorts, creating a supportive alumni community. The alumni often join us to share experiences with program participants. In addition, alumni located in the same region support each other in continuing their leadership journey. What's more, a global alumni network, facilitated by the program coordinator, has helped alumni connect across regions to share information and help each other in ways that transcend the organization chart functional groups, divisions, and regions.

Follow Up programs were begun in 2012, bringing together alumni from different cohorts, further strengthening the alumni bonds and commitment to work together to achieve what no organizational mandate can.

In 2012 we added a "poster session" to the final presentations of the 8th program. In these sessions the audience has a chance to mingle in small groups with the teams and discuss their ideas in more detail.

In 2012 during the first week of the 9th program we were invited to meet the CEO and Chairman for the first time!

2013 we completed the 10th such program.

- At that poster session the (Japanese) CEO came to visit for a few minutes.
- The "Global HR" department, being no longer necessary, has been dissolved back into the HR department, which is now inherently global by nature.

At the April finish of the 10th program the company executives committed to continue this program on an annual basis for the long-term. Since then the 11th and 12th programs have been completed, bringing the total graduates to over 220 people. The 13th program launched in Antwerp, Belgium, in March 2015, and the 14th, 15th and 16th programs are already on the calendar to be completed in the next 3 years.

Challenges & Solutions

CHALLENGE: Initially there was a hesitancy about inviting a group of people from different cultures, and who didn't speak the same native language, to spend 6 months working together in 3 intensive weeks, and in virtual teams in between in-person sessions.

SOLUTION: A Japanese native who lived and worked in the US, and was married to an American, became the sponsor of this initiative. Through his courageous sponsorship, other decision-makers and funders were convinced to pilot this program.

CHALLENGE: Assigning the teams before their team project ideas were shared reduced the opportunities to capitalize on synergies around personal passion for projects.

SOLUTION: We proposed the "World Cafe" and "Idea Marketplace" way of sharing ideas, and then having teams self-organize according to cross-functional and cross-cultural criteria. The self-determination of choosing project themes and then volunteering for projects based on interest vs. being assigned to teams greatly increased the commitment of the individuals to their projects. In addition this created a spirit of "4 projects, but ONE TEAM" among the cohort.

CHALLENGE: Integrating the team projects and proposals into the company strategy.

SOLUTION: Repeated themes of strategic importance to the company, presented to broad audiences of executives from all over the world. Active recruitment of the audience proved key to getting these ideas into widespread conversations, which has led to increased uptake of the projects into the company strategy. Also, having executive sponsors who were personally interested in the project, and willing to support ongoing implementation, helped. Most effective, however, has been the personal commitment of the project teams to "Keep going!" no matter what they executives did or did not allow or support. ; -)

Benefits & Metrics

The tangible benefits of this work have been:

- over half of the 40 team projects continue in some form after the end of the program.
- strong working relationships across divisions, countries, cultures and regions.
- synergistic business opportunities have arisen from these relationships.
- mentoring and coaching among the program alumni provides an alternative professional growth path compared to traditional "manager-employee" relationships.
- over half of program alumni have been transferred to positions of more responsibility, including overseas assignments outside of their home countries.
- widespread executive involvement in these programs through "executive talks", and participating in the audience for the team project presentations and poster sessions has helped executives learn more about what's going on at the operational level across their company.
- active executive participation in the Q&A portions of the team project presentations have enabled executives to "talk with each other" about difficult topics that were previously "undiscussable" while appearing to ask questions to the teams.
- employee engagement has increased and voluntary turnover has declined among these participants.
- the entire organizational culture has shifted now that there is a critical mass of people with a shared language and shared framework achieving "impossible" results together through the power of the group genius (both program graduates and executives who have experienced the program through their participation as speakers and audience members).

Lessons

1. The mid-level people in this organization have a very keen understanding of their business, and anticipate issues of strategic and tactical importance several years before their executives are aware of them. The project themes chosen reflect these emerging trends, and the executives can accelerate their organization's success through listening carefully to the themes presented in the team projects.
2. The problems in these teams composed of people from different countries and cultures were never due to culture, they were due to the fact that these were human beings having normal human being problems. Unfortunately

sometimes we are tempted to label a human interaction problem as due to country of birth/culture, making it "impossible" to solve, and then removing responsibility for even attempting to solve it.

3. Leadership is not position in an organization or title on a business card, it is thinking like a leader, communicating like a leader, and acting like a leader. Individuals will step up and "lead from any chair" when they are given the opportunity to work on something that they feel is important and they personally care about.

4. Giving more and more autonomy as possible to the participants was correlated with vastly improved results.

5. Involving other people in the program, through audience participation, plant tours, and having participants share their insights and key learnings with their home teams, greatly multiplied the positive impact of these programs. In some cases a tool that was particularly useful was implemented by one graduate throughout all of the North America operations, and was touted by the President of the Americas region as having contributed greatly to their increased success in this market!

Credits

Yuko Shibata, Executive at ALC Education, Inc.

Kimberly Wiefeling, Founder and President, Wiefeling Consulting, Inc.

Our collaborators at ALC, and at the client.

Our wonderful team of Silicon Valley facilitators, including Alan Tsuda, Nathalie Udo, Dr. Francine Gordon, Dr. Juan Montermoso, Ken Chen, and several others.

Materials

More information here: http://www.alc-education.co.jp/business/product/gmp_detail/index.html

These videos describe this program: <http://wiefeling.com/work-w-japanese-cos/global-management-program-videos/>

Here's a program overview:

15 Days

Powerful Communication (1 day)

Breakthrough Leadership (2 days)

Transformational Leadership (1 day)

Creativity and Innovation, Design-Thinking (3 days)

Strategic Marketing & Global Marketing (2 days)

Decision-making via Financial Analysis (1.5 days)

Team Effectiveness & Execution Excellence (2.5 days)

Project Final Preparation and Presentations (2 days)