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Building a Successful Multi-Site Team Using Chocolate

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Abstract

Working with remote teams, whether across town, or across the ocean, can have its set of challenges. Trying to determine how to interact, when to interact, and if to interact can make the difference between a successful end result and a failure. The teams in both the US and India for the McAfee product Total Protection Service have created an ongoing successful model that has resulted in on time delivery and high team moral. There seems to be a common thread that binds the team together – CHOCOLATE. This paper will describe the initial interactions, planning methods, travel tips, team building experiences and types of chocolate used to enable our successful team experience.

Introduction

The idea for this paper was an ongoing set of dialogs between me (Doug) and my counterpart in India (Srinidhi). We wanted to demonstrate that there are two points of view, one from the US perspective and one from the India perspective. You will see sections that encapsulate the abstract and are from both points of view. We do not boast to have all of the answers and our working methodology is a constant work in progress. We have found some success and that is what we are trying to describe.

Doug:

When I was a kid, I always referred to my father as “sir”. I just got in the habit of referring to other people, regardless of age, more formally. I was also very polite by saying thank you and holding the door for people. I had no idea that these actions would prove valuable to me later in life in an effort to build relationship with people in another country. It seemed to work out that way for me in my relationship with the QA team working with me in Bangalore, India and it wasn’t from the perspective that I thought it would be either. The VP of Quality told me prior to my first trip to pay for team events and lunches. When I arrived the Director of Quality in India and I had a one on one. In it she told me that the team considers it an honor to have a “visitor” and to allow them to pay and to set up events. I quickly learned what she meant.

Srinidhi:

Working successfully in a shared mode with a distributed team is a challenge. The common force that binds us together is the product vision, the cause, the drive to be the best amongst other teams across the company and off course “Chocolates”.

Initial interactions

Doug:

When I first learned that I would be managing a team that was located in India, I had no idea of what to expect. I had dealt with multi-site US teams before, while working at Intel, but the involvement of those teams was not the daily tasks that it is with this team. Initially, my dealings with the team in Bangalore started out on the phone. There was a weekly meeting that had been scheduled by the previous manager for 7:00am on Tuesdays. I wondered why so early? On the initial call I introduced myself and describe my working methodology. One of the items that I stressed was that I do not expect anyone on the team to do something that I am not willing to do myself. I really don’t think they understood this at first. They would. I also didn’t understand the relationship that an Indian employee has with a person of responsibility, especially from another country. The 7:00am meeting continued since they are twelve and a half hours difference from the Pacific Time zone and they were all staying late in their day to attend. We worked well together and since it was relatively late in the project cycle, the tasks they were already doing provided value in releasing the product. When we shipped, I thanked them for their efforts. It was the acknowledgement and the appreciation, the holding of the door if you will, that helped to solidify the working relationship.

Srinidhi:

Having a counterpart in the US really helped in getting the right Information and direction at the right time. When I was first assigned to the team, quality time was spent in understanding individuals and teams onsite. During this process we built mutual trust which happened to be the

foundation of our mode of working. The beauty of such a cohesive team is that it has a mix of people from different cultures, different styles, different modes of communication and different ways of interpreting things. Our weekly telephone conferences did help to mitigate these factors. It was worth the time even if it meant staying late in the office. Such conversations also helped us in understanding technical problems with our product and in coming up with solutions. We did define clear roles and responsibilities across sites and planned tasks in a way that there is no redundancy across sites. By doing so, we never encountered a conflicting situation. We started to build a “can do” attitude within the team. Our collective decision making did bring about a level of belonging among the team members, who would then, open up and start sharing technical ideas. With the technical skills, the right attitude and effective use of the 24 hour cycle across sites, this team was on a mission to prove that we can work seamlessly even if the team is distributed. The first couple of successful releases were a testament to what the team could achieve. After every release we would go back to the drawing board and do an assessment of what went well and what did not go well. This helps us to improve and fine-tune not only our processes, but also our working model.

Travel Tips

Doug:

Shortly after becoming the QA manager for the ToPS team, I was told by the VP of Quality that I should travel to India and meet the team. He felt it was very important to be able to have a face to go along with the name. He also mentioned that the teams in India really enjoyed American chocolate. I had a passport, but needed to have a letter of introduction from the McAfee India office in order to obtain a visa for travel to India. Once we (including our very helpful Admin, Marlana) received the visa and ordered the tickets, I thought I was all ready. Not quite. Again, taking advice from others that had travelled to Bangalore; I was informed that I should go to my doctor for “shots”. I was given a Hepatitis shot (series actually), a prescription for both a daily malaria (don’t take the weekly) and Cipro. Cipro is an anti-biotic you take in the event you developed traveler’s diarrhea. The primary way to get this is to drink the water in India. I developed a standard rule of thumb while travelling to Bangalore. It is to eat food that is baked, boiled, or peeled, and to drink only bottled water. The team looks out for me while I am there by ordering bottled water at each restaurant we visit. There was one time when the restaurant served ice cream and it looked very good, but the scoop was sitting in a bucket of warm water. I disappointedly avoided the ice cream. I even use bottled water to brush my teeth.

The flight is long. My flight involves flying for 10 hours to Frankfurt, Germany and then another 9.5 hours to Bangalore. The flight arrives in Bangalore around midnight and after clearing customs and finding my ride to the hotel (we also utilize a corporate apartment) it is about 2:00am. After sleeping for a short while, it is off to the office by 9:00am. I usually begin to feel sleepy at 4:00pm my first day there. On the trip to the office on the first day, you are introduced to traffic in Bangalore. There are lane markings on some roads, but there are ignored. On a road with two lanes each direction, there are five to seven vehicles. Some are cars, some are motorcycles and some are three wheeled rickshaws that are taxis. The other thing is that everyone honks their horn. The rooms at the hotel (the Oberoi) have an outer door and an inner door to keep out the street noise. One more thing about travel, you are only allowed a certain weight for your checked bag (it varies for each airline), so plan carefully. I had too many one pound bags of chocolate and needed to move some to my carry on. ☺

Srinidhi:

Traveling to the US has been a pleasant experience for me especially after joining the ToPS QA Team. I have been well received by my counterparts in both QA and development and they have been very co-operative. We feel that face to face interaction is very much needed in a distributed team. Both teams try to make a point to have someone travel at least once in a year on crucial

assignments.

Planning Methods

Doug:

The way in which we plan projects requires a software quality plan (SQP) at the point we reach the plan complete milestone. Within the quality plan is a QA schedule. One of the methods we utilize in order to get the schedule data is to take the development components from the engineering plan and from that create a testing schedule spreadsheet. One of the first planning exercises that we did as a team was to have the test leads in both the US and India take this spreadsheet and compile their estimates as to who owns, and how long it will take to test (develop test cases, completed the functional testing, and to regress any defects) the individual components. They went to the teams and received feedback. Once this was completed, there was a pivot table to calculate which tester was testing what component and what was the total time required to complete the testing. This data was very valuable to the schedule portions of the SQP, and more importantly, it came from the team.

We have a set of tasks centering around the posting of the files on the server that is an exact process. We needed to do this in order to avoid an erroneous posting that would cause all of the customers on the service to receive incorrect files. Due to personnel changes, this posting process needed to be moved from the US to India. Our posting engineer in India would ask questions, but would take the stance that the US team would always have the answer. I actually gave him permission to challenge me; to ask questions if HE deems something incorrect about the files we were posting. The first few times, he would apologize after proposing a question. Once he felt comfortable and to this day, he will question our process as well as the correct implementation.

We now have calls in the evening US time. They are usually at 9:00pm, which is 9:30am in Bangalore. We did this since there are more people that attend in Bangalore. We have one meeting a week that is a team meeting where all attend from both the US and India. We have other meetings that are done as needed during the critical points in the project. There are usually no meetings on Friday nights (India Saturday). When we do not have a meeting scheduled, we utilize instant messenger to communicate ideas and quick thoughts. I find that when I am logged on in the evening, I will check to see who on the India team is logged in and send them a note. We use the instant messenger extensively and would recommend it for any remote team.

Srinidhi:

By adopting an Agile Mode of Operation, we have been able to reap a lot of benefits like having shorter development cycles which leads to lower risk, less changes, greater predictability and higher quality. By adhering to an Agile Resource Model, we have come up with a spreadsheet to estimate the target quarter based resources availability, leading to better effort sizing. We have also implemented user story based development with complete traceability to the MRD. By getting QA involved early enough and following a test driven approach that pairs QA and Dev engineers together, it has resulted in high quality releases. We also work with our development counterparts in attempting early defect prevention rather than defect detection at later stages.

We bring product specific functional teams together as a core team for efficient problem solving. This would comprise of QA, Dev, Tech Pubs and Support teams. During crunch time we implement a daily stand up meetings. We use this as a forum to bring up “what I did yesterday”, “what I’m doing today”, any blocking issues, and it also acts as a forum to get other issues resolved. This process takes less than 5 minutes of time. We have also come up with simple Agile reporting artifacts, which takes less time to fill, but gives a clear indication and status of the testing activities. We also have recurring telephone conferences, to keep people across sites on

the same page. All project related documents are located and maintained in a single location (Twiki) for cross site reference.

We plan for ownership of components to individuals across sites. This helps with individual specialty, but it also helps to cross train with coverage issues that may happen. All engineers attend planning meetings and are assigned goals and deliverables. Attendance at these meetings is an active not a passive role as all are free to ask questions, get involved, and collect the information needed to design effective tests. For each user story document we help determine the risks, issues, concerns, complexities, assumptions, and dependencies. We also encourage cross site review of Quality Plan, the schedule, the user stories, and the results.

We believe that “Anything which cannot be measured cannot be improved”. We generate metrics through all the stages of product development, not just the QA stabilization phases (Requirement, Planning, Design, Development, QA, Release and Support). We constantly refer to these metrics and set higher level of expectations and improvements for future releases.

Team Building

Doug:

During one of my first visits to India, I was asked if I wanted to interview one of the candidates for a test position. During the course of the interview, I asked the question, “Do you like chocolate?” The individual looked at me for a second, and then smiled. When she said yes, I told her she would get along well with the rest of the team. This technique has been repeated during other interviews as well. It makes the person relax and also helps them to understand that we are a team. I have been told this is very different that the “normal” questions that are asked, but one that is welcomed by the candidates.

During every visit I have made to Bangalore, I have brought chocolate. I will bring some in on the first day in the office and set it on one of the desks. That desk becomes a gathering place for discussions about the product as well as about the people. It works as a very pleasant stand up meeting to catch up with each member of the team (as well as people from other teams). In addition, whenever I am in India, we will go out as a team to lunch. The team finds this a good opportunity to share thoughts and ideas.

Just after my first trip to Bangalore, one of the QA managers from India came to the US for some training. On one evening I asked him if he would like to go to dinner. He brought one of the QA engineers that he worked with and we had dinner at my home. Now, whenever one of the team comes to the Beaverton office, they come to my house for dinner. Sometimes, for the vegetarian type eaters, we would have a toasted cheese sandwich and tomato soup and all enjoy it. For the non-vegetarian, it is a barbeque. ☺ I have also been invited to homes in Bangalore for dinner while I visit.

Srinidhi:

After every major release, we make sure that we go out on a day’s event with the team. Past events have included team lunches, bowling, go-kart racing, and water games. This would rejuvenate the team. Very recently we went to watch a 20:20 cricket match. All members on the team will act as product and company ambassadors. We distribute promotional materials like caps, t-shirts, jackets, coffee mugs to show off the company or product specific logos. We try to ensure that there are “Team Building Events” on a time bound basis so as to bring the team much closer, which results in a better understanding of each other and ultimately results in higher efficiency of the team.

Types of Chocolates

Doug:

Hershey kisses

Ghirardelli's

Nestle value pack (Nestles Crunch, Nestles Chocolate with Almonds and Nestles Milk Chocolate)

Srinidhi:

Dove

Ritter Sport

Hershey Almond

Nestle-Crunch

Conclusion

Doug:

People all have basic needs and one of the most important is respect. A team is a group of individuals, who are working on a similar task that will provide some benefit. On a successful multi site team, there is also mutual respect. Maybe by engaging with your team, asking for their input, and providing an open environment for sharing both face to face and electronically, you can build that mutual respect. It might be as simple as a thank you sir, or a let me get that for you, but please, don't forget the chocolate.

Srinidhi:

We believe that for any individual to be at peak performance, they should be at ease. That is one of the reasons why we believe in a "Fun at Work" culture. The organizations role is very important in building a successful team. There has to be strong thought leadership in driving career development and training. In recognizing talent and rewarding the deserving ones, having employee friendly policies and work culture, we would help to ensure higher employee satisfaction levels.

Considerable amount of time should be spent on getting resources that have right mix of talent and attitude, the success lies in inducting and grooming them with team values. We need to align individual goals to that of the product and organization. This helps individuals in the team to achieve their aspirations and thereby adding value to the product and the organization. Enough opportunities should be given for innovation at work. The key lies in encouraging and motivating the team to achieve something new that would add value to the company. The theme of our teams is chocolates; we make the candidate feel at ease during the interview process by asking if they like chocolates? This would ensure that the person sheds away the fear or tension associated with a normal interview and be more involved in discussions, this is one of the binding factors of the team.