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Managing a Global Team: Greg James at Sun Microsystems, Inc. (B)

"I learned that as a manager, you will face crises. You are not a failure if they are created on your watch. How you deal with these crises, however, will define your success as a leader."

—Greg James

Greg James returned from his trip exhausted but intent on making the changes necessary to help his team work together effectively. The process problems that had instigated the HS Holdings crisis were easily remedied: James unified the two support queues, collapsed the weekend and weekday protocol phone numbers into one, and made sure that customer contact information was updated and universally available. But he knew that creating team cohesion was going to be more difficult. If James had learned anything from the HS Holdings crisis, he needed to keep his team more engaged with their client work and the company as a whole, and to keep himself better apprised of how his team was functioning.

Before James could begin to create the kind of team cohesion he sorely needed, upper management wanted him to hold people accountable for the myriad of mistakes that had caused the crisis in the first place. James decided to weather the heat from upper management alone. Not only did he not fire any of his team members, he took full responsibility for all of the mistakes that had occurred under his watch. James knew that mistakes are a fact of life in such complex organizations, and that his team need not be punished. Protecting his team members was not only a great boon to morale, but it fostered greater loyalty; team members began outdoing each other to perform better for James.

In order to further foster team cohesion, James knew his team needed more interaction, with him and with each other. He instituted weekly meetings with his eight team managers, allowing them to share the status of their sub-teams and deal in-depth with any issues that might come up. In addition, bi-weekly one-on-one meetings with team managers enabled James to discuss specific manager as well as team issues, and one-on-one "skip level meetings" allowed engineers to elicit their unique concerns to James, effectively "skipping" a managerial level to speak with him directly. Perhaps most important, James let everyone know that all topics were fair game for discussion. James also wanted this engagement to trickle down; managers began holding weekly meetings with their own team

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Professor Tsedal Neeley prepared this case with the assistance of Research Associate Steven Shafer. Certain details have been disguised. HBS cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

members in the same way James was with them. More informally, James made sure to be available for spontaneous interactions using instant messaging, phone calls, and email, and he encouraged face-to-face meetings with both managers and engineers, if he was onsite or team members were visiting the U.S. office.

Meetings were also designed to help keep the big picture in mind. James implemented weekly worldwide technology meetings to give engineers the opportunity to discuss "hot" and difficult global customer issues. Circulating the minutes from those meetings kept everyone up to date on the most pressing issues facing the team as a whole. Finally, James began to hold deep dive planning sessions with the management team twice a year, which helped his sub-teams feel invested in the course of the team as a whole.

These meetings successfully brought James and his team members closer, but James wanted to do more to keep himself in the loop. He implemented "Case Management Tools" to document engineers' work. With the click of a mouse, James and other managers could use these tools to see exactly what a particular engineer had worked on at any time. These case notes and updates helped him not only keep tabs on the issues that a particular engineer had faced, but also understand the progress that was made and how customers responded; he never wanted to be out of the loop again.

Regarding these changes, Ahmed Nazr, the manager for the Dubai team, noted, "I feel like I have more access to James and the other team managers. The meetings James implemented have given me the space to really talk about the unique circumstances we face here in Dubai, so that everyone, not just James, understands. Being involved in the company planning sessions has gotten me more invested in Sun's progress as a whole and how I fit into it." As James explained, "One of the engineers in India told me during a recent skip level meeting: 'I really see the walls coming down and we are engaging much better with each other.' When your customers, internal teams, and members of your own global teams start noticing the difference, they become appreciative of positive change; this is where real success is apparent."

The changes James brought to his team appeared to be working. Crucially, in light of the HS Holdings crisis, engineers and managers were responding more quickly as they transferred hot-issues from one time zone to another. His team could work around the clock, passing issues from team to team and back again across three time zones in a 24-hour period. In fact, James' team could respond to problems continuously for several days without tiring engineers, attending to any client, anywhere, at anytime. Internal research showed that customer satisfaction was up by 72 percent, the case time-to-resolution was down by 21 percent, and the backlog of cases was reduced by 48 percent. Sun has begun seeing double-digit revenue increases year-over-year. Moreover, employee satisfaction was up, and it seemed that overall team members were stepping up and "taking care of business." The team felt more united.

By 2008, James knew the changes he made were working, but that he couldn't look back:

> Metrics may indicate that things are trending in right direction and we may meet or exceed our objective goals. But equally important are the subjective measures that come in the form of comments. We set out to achieve customer satisfaction level of 90 percent and we beat our goal by 5 percent, which is great. But when you hear your customers tell sales teams and other customers that they like the support they are getting, the team is even more motivated. These results propel the entire team towards success, and you use this momentum to achieve even better results. All of this is an ongoing process. You need to keep working at these things to make them better, keep engaging people. I believe if we do not make forward progress then we will start slipping back and that is not an option.