practical guide for international leaders

11 actionable tips with impact

eidam & partner.
your intercultural experts.

I'm writing this article from my own perspective as a leader.

This guide hands you up-to-date tips and strategies for successful collaboration in international teams.

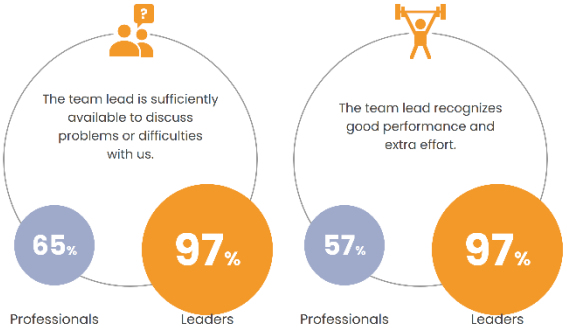
Enjoy the read – and have just as much success putting it to work!

Markus
Founder & Managing Director, Eidam & Partner

fellow leaders...

... let's start with a small shift in perspective. The charts on the right are based on a recent study that surveyed thousands of professionals and leaders.

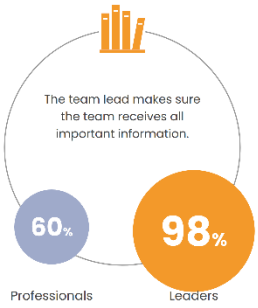
Notice the wide gap between how leaders rate themselves and how their team members see them?



what does this mean for us?

We can't stop questioning ourselves. And we need to talk to our own team [or run an anonymous survey] to get an objective picture of where things stand.

As the survey shows, many leaders assume that things are largely fine, while their team members see it completely differently. That gap deserves our full attention.



Eidam & Partner offers an effective online tool for exactly this: it measures the strengths and improvement areas of international teams objectively.

actionable tips for international leaders

As hard as it is: we need to stay out of the team's day-to-day work! Our primary job is working ON the team rather than IN it.

If we're already at 100% capacity because we lead AND work inside the team, we run out of time to spot the stumbling blocks ahead. We're also less available when individual team members bring us their problems, and we can't coach our team enough to pass on what we know...

The bottom line, with all due respect: get out of the day-to-day!

I've had excellent results with shared leadership myself. The short version of this leadership style: to strengthen commitment to the team or project, delegate responsibility for individual tasks to different people.

The more responsibility a team member takes on, the more invested they become in the project. It also takes weight off the team lead. We don't have to do everything ourselves! Let's trust our teams and share responsibility! That, in turn, frees up time for exactly what we just covered: staying out of the day-to-day.

more tips for leaders

Skip the comparisons between team members
Lines like "It works fine for Max, why not for you?" quickly breed self-interest and sharp elbows, because they fuel competition inside the team.

A mentoring program for junior team members
Experienced project and team members pass on their knowledge in a targeted way by acting as coaches. Important: Introduce it properly, guide it, and follow through, or the program exists on paper only and never comes to life.

Praise! Praise! Praise!
We leaders tend to communicate only when there's a problem. Let's not forget to praise and to call out what's been achieved, even when everything appears to be running smoothly!

Put friction on the table early
There are moments when, as a leader, you sense that something on the human level isn't working in the team. Sometimes there's more than a feeling: clear signs point to real problems. All too often, though, we lack the time or energy to deal with it.

Unresolved problems compound over time. Let's tackle small disagreements as early as possible, before they grow!

build your own [team] culture

Whenever people come together, unwritten rules emerge sooner or later, covering everything from how people treat each other to how they communicate.

Every member brings their own experiences [good and bad], attitudes, expectations, and skills.

For this rich mix of human diversity to grow into productive, constructive collaboration, we as leaders need to shape it! A team culture will emerge either way. The only question is whether its design is left to chance or to our own skill.

the kickoff sets the tone

Successful teams and projects start with a well-planned kickoff! Even when the temptation to skip it is strong and the time budget is tight: invest enough time and thought in a kickoff event that every team member attends! And yes, fly in your international colleagues [where you have them].

That costs money and time. An ineffective, or even dysfunctional, team costs far more of both.

Take the team out of its usual surroundings for this! Book a hotel, move the whole thing to a meadow in the countryside, you name it.

What matters is the change of scenery: it sparks creativity, signals how much the project or team matters, makes people less reachable [think: "I'll just quickly answer a few emails."], and clears everyone's head for the conversations that count.

the more you agree up front...

... the more efficient you'll be!

During the kickoff, create the rules for internal communication and collaboration TOGETHER! The emphasis is on TOGETHER: that rules out the team lead setting terms unilaterally. Rules the team has built jointly are far more likely to stick later on.

Take the time to clarify questions like these:

- Which information gets communicated how? What do we use email for, what's chat for, and when do we pick up the phone?
- Is there a day or time that works particularly well for meetings? How often and how long do we want to meet?
- Which topics belong in team meetings, and which are better handled in a 1:1?
- Do we send a thank-you email when we receive a document, or not? Who gets CC'd, and when?
- How do we want to give feedback?
- How are roles distributed across the team?
- ...

In international teams especially, widely different values, ideas, and expectations meet here, because priorities typically differ from country to country. That can quickly lead to frustration, and to rules the whole team doesn't stand behind.

We support you in this process as a neutral third party. Bridging different cultural perspectives is what we do best.

"yes, but..." – building a feedback culture that gets results

Few things matter more than a healthy feedback culture. At the same time, it's one of the biggest challenges there is, because far too many people still react to feedback by taking offense, getting defensive, or even lashing out. Worst case, this creates a conflict inside the team that you'll later have to untangle the hard way. Or feedback simply stops: "Nothing's going to change anyway. So why bother with the conversation."

Yet feedback is essential to working well together and to getting better. Positive feedback builds cohesion and lifts the mood. Naming what could improve lays the groundwork for better processes and better communication within the team.

Talking through improvement areas can even resolve conflicts, because conversation is what releases pressure that's been building up. Brushing problems aside or ignoring them only lets them pile up. And they keep piling up until it all comes crashing down like an avalanche and disrupts your project or team for the long term.

So set out to become the team with the best feedback culture in the world!

Ideally, make a strong feedback culture a priority from the kickoff, or build the first steps toward it right into the kickoff itself. Then intensify the process as the collaboration continues. Sooner rather than later, by the way.

the personal factor

Nothing strengthens the cohesion of [international] teams more than personal relationships. People prefer working with people they like. So give your team plenty of opportunities to get to know each other on a personal level.

Start at the kickoff and keep it going throughout the collaboration. Classic team-building formats [led by a skilled, engaging trainer] work well, and so do informal events: barbecues, bowling nights, dinners out, ...

a little better every day

These tips and strategies for international leaders come from our Global Leadership Program, which holds a lot more for you. Want to know more, or bring the whole program in-house? Find the details here!

Background on our international team-building workshops is here!

A little better every day. That's the personal motto that has carried me well through 22+ years in leadership. Of course, not everything in your leadership work will run smoothly, and that's absolutely fine. You're human, and so are your team members. It would take a miracle for everything to go perfectly all the time.

So: believe in yourself! Believe in your team! And keep trying to get a little better every day!