

Leading a Virtual Cross Cultural Team

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ABSTRACT

Most organizations are made up of people from different cultures. Our communication patterns, including formal and informal language used as we engage and address customers, clients, bosses and co-workers, are all predicated on our culture. Broadly, in today's global business, where technology helps us to collaborate, the need for Virtual Cross Cultural Teams is increasing. VCCT is simply an expression that describes the work done by several people from a particular organization, but from different cultural orientations in different places and time zones using the available technological mediums to pursue effective collaboration. Today, we need to develop a completely new skill set to lead virtual cross-cultural teams to high performance. It will involve understanding the cultural dimensions so that we can generate and formally represent an evolving common culture with regards to the specific problem face. Hence, being able to lead a VCC team is even more important for today and future organization's projects. This paper presents a clear understanding of this new phenomenon in global business, the role of culture and why it matters, the benefits and challenges of CCV teams, and finally outlines some key application points for leading a CCV team well.

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With an increasing trend in globalization and increasing technological advances, participating and even being called to lead a virtual cross cultural team is becoming more and more likely. It requires both technology and personal skills to effectively lead a cross cultural virtual team. It is increasingly likely that at some point you will find yourself either leading or participating in a cross culture team. With this in mind, it is important to understand the role of culture and why it matters, the advantages and challenges of CCV teams, and present some key application points for leading a CCV team well.

The Center for Advance Research on Language Acquisition defines culture as the “shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group.” One well known analogy to understanding culture is the iceberg. While a significant portion of the iceberg is visible above the water line, a more significant part is below the water line. Such is the case with culture. It is important to recognize that culture shapes us in ways we are seldom aware of. Culture shapes our subconscious thought patterns and habits, so without cultural awareness we will assume that the world thinks and operates like us.

One of the challenges of cultural awareness, is we are seldom aware of our own culture – we tend to think of culture as “out there” instead of recognizing the way our national culture has shaped us.

(See figure 1. in the appendix)

One of the key challenges for anyone involved in cross cultural work is identifying the way their own culture shapes them. As individuals, we are seldom aware that the way we perceive time, communication, and leadership is shaped through our culture and personal experiences. Without this understanding, and willingness to learn from others and the ability to approach our team members with an understanding of culture, experiencing other cultures will be a frustrating and fruitless exercise. This understanding of and empathy with other cultures is known as cultural intelligence, and is similar to emotional intelligence, which is a key ingredient to any successful cross cultural team management. Cultural Intelligence is a set of skills that can be developed through practice like other leadership skills. According to a Forbes article (2015), these skills include:

1. relational skills; talking and interacting with people from other cultures
2. tolerance of uncertainty; whether you are able to tolerate uncertainties, ambiguities and unexpected changes in an intercultural interaction
3. adaptability; whether you can change your behavior according to the cultural demands
4. empathy; whether you can put yourself in a culturally different person's shoes and imagine the situation from his or her perspective
5. perceptual acuity; whether you understand other people's feelings and subtle meanings during intercultural interactions

This skill set is especially important for leaders of virtual teams, as a lack of face to face time creates a bigger need for trust, clear communication and shared goals. It is easy to see how a strong relational skill – taking time to know other team members (even though you may never have met) helps build trust and rapport. It is also important to be open to new ways of doing things- like in adaptability. The Forbes article goes on to say that these skills are learnt through experience in cross cultural setting, but what if the only cross cultural experience is leading a virtual team? It is important then to ask well timed questions concerning cultural norms, build on a basic cultural understanding of team members' home countries and approach it as a learning experience for all involved. By creating space for all to learn and grow, much will be achieved.

Another useful tool for cross cultural managers is cultural models. Culture is a wide term and one that is hard to define. Over the years researchers have tried to create models that help define and explain the various components of culture. Two well-known cultural models are *Cultural Dimensions* by Geert Hofstede and his *The Cultural Orientations Model*. Between 1967 and 1973 Professor Geert Hofstede researched how values in the workplace are shaped by culture by analyzing a large sample of employee values collected within IBM. According to the Hofstede Insights website (2017) - "The data covered more than 70 countries, from which Hofstede first used the 40 countries with the largest groups of respondents and afterwards extended the analysis to 50 countries and 3 regions." The research yielded six categories or dimensions as Hofstede refers to them. These dimensions describe preferences and expectations in how colleagues relate to one another.

The dimensions are:

- Power Distance Index (PDI)
- Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV)
- Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS)
- Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)
- Long Term Orientation versus Short Term Normative Orientation (LTO)

A second and perhaps clearer model is *The Cultural Orientations Model*. The cultural orientations model has 10 dimensions:

1. *Environment*: How individuals view and relate to the people, objects and issues in their sphere of influence
2. *Time*: How individuals perceive the nature of time and its use
3. *Action*: How individuals view actions and interactions
4. *Communication*: How individuals express themselves
5. *Space*: How individuals demarcate their physical and psychological space
6. *Power*: How individuals view differential power relationships
7. *Individualism*: How individuals define their identity
8. *Competitiveness*: How individuals are motivated
9. *Structure*: How individuals approach change, risk, ambiguity and uncertainty
10. *Thinking*: How individuals conceptualize

Cultural models help leaders become aware of thought processes they might otherwise take for granted. There are several online tools offered through websites that allow the leader or all the team members take a cultural profile, similar to a personality profile to learn their preferences concerning different styles as it relates to these elements of culture. Perhaps it is not the particular model or tool that is critical; rather it is the self-awareness that analysis brings about. Without self-awareness it is hard to empathize with team members who may have a different cultural slant. One research project interviewed fifty (50) IT specialists, all of whom had professional experience in virtual collaboration. The aim of the study was to identify participants' perception of virtual team collaboration. Overall their responses were positive, but they also named significant disadvantages. The participants named cooperation with professionals from different countries as the most key advantage, especially in a specialized field where there may not be an expert available locally. Other benefits mentioned included being better prepared to meet the needs of the global market. Quoting one of the interviewees -

'Working in a virtual team makes the contact with clients from different parts of globe easier. The final users of IT applications don't understand all the technical aspects clearly. Using an international virtual team to develop these applications provides a chance to understand their needs better and break the language and cultural barriers', - IT Specialist.

A third advantage named was working across time zones allowed continuous work on projects without breaks. This would have significant advantages if leveraged, with skill. One can almost envision a relay race in which the baton is masterfully passed from one athlete to another!

On the other hand, the participants also named significant challenges faced when working on a CCV team. And while some named time zones as an advantage, it was also listed as a top drawback. Twenty responders named the challenge of time zones as a top complaint.

‘It is difficult to fix the optimum hour to meet together (Poland, Israel, USA)’, ‘Everyday schedule is determined by time zone differences’, ‘Their weekend starts on our Friday and working day is shifted by several hours. Additionally, all of us have flexible working time so we often can’t receive fast answer or help. Sometimes we have the response after a few days’.

Technical problems were also named as a disadvantage – including slow internet, or software challenges or simply the challenge of trying to communicate long distance as opposed to face to face. Difficulties related to language were perhaps the most significant challenge. Even when participants share a common language- there were challenges using unknown abbreviations, difficulty understanding a variety of accents or poor writing skills.

With cultural differences discussed and preferences understood, a team can begin work on the actual project or goal at hand. Erin Meyers, in her article “The Four Keys to Success with Virtual Teams”, gives practical suggestions on leading a virtual team and describes how it differs from leading a co-located team. This different approach is especially important for cross cultural virtual teams, because differences in culture and language can lead to increased confusion around expectations and goals. Clear expectations, access to materials and clear roles all help a CCV team succeed. Meyer’s first suggestion is to lead differently from how you would if leading an “in person team.” While it may be possible for a team working in the same office to have loose job descriptions, this will cause confusion and even a lack of trust in a virtual team. In a virtual team, the leader must remove this ambiguity and from the beginning set clear, formalized roles and responsibilities. The article “How to Build Trust on your Virtual team” goes on to say how important it is to set the agenda and ensure each member has access to the information necessary for strong leadership to fulfill their role on the team. A Harvard Business School Review publication on ‘How to Build Trust on Your Cross-Cultural Team’ by Molinsky and Gundling (2015) lays it this way -

“For a multicultural team, make sure the team has a clear and compelling direction, its members have access to the information and resources they need to successfully carry out the work, stakeholders in different geographies and functions are on board with the team’s agenda, and the team is staffed wisely — ideally with people who have the requisite technical skills as well as cultural intelligence and global dexterity.”

Flexibility is another characteristic named as beneficial to CCV teams. Meyers specifically names a willingness to “try on” various decision making processes. She cites the variety in several countries’ decision making processes ranging from seeking input and making a quick decision (American), long discussions and consensus building (Sweden) and informal one on one discussions prior to the group meeting (Japan). It may be worthwhile asking the team in advance which decision making model they are accustomed to. Certainly, there are pros and cons to each approach, and an openness to try different approaches depending on the nature of the particular decision would in turn demonstrate flexibility and helps all team members have clear expectations. Not only is flexibility in decision making important, but also flexibility is required when facing the challenges of working across time differences.

To adjust to these challenges, and for the sake of the success of the team, participants “should be available for early morning or late night conversations, for travelling to client site during the week and much more. Virtual teams are very much dependent on flexibility.”

Meyer’s third suggestion is building trust as key within virtual teams. According to her “trust is measured almost exclusively in terms of reliability, “because of that, there must be a “highly defined process” and clear expectations so that what is promised is delivered and trust can be built. One of the disadvantages of a virtual team is that even with video communication tools, body language is limited, and this (among other factors) slows the trust building process.

Duran names trust as the “most important aspect for a successful team.” And goes on to say that communication is the most important element in building trust between the team members. By having trust, people will be able to understand and rely on each other. Trust is definitely an essential ingredient in a virtual workplace.

It is also worth addressing the challenge of communication itself. Even when there is a shared language, problems can arise. Some may be self-conscious of their language skills and be hesitant to speak up on conference calls, others may use local idiomatic language that may not be familiar to all, and others may have difficulty to understanding accents. The Commisceo Global Blog - Perfect for Culture Vultures – offers tips for easing the challenges associated with cross cultural communication. Many challenges can be alleviated or averted by using simple English and also avoiding local abbreviations or jargons. Also, over communicate issues and be explicit regarding expectations to minimize assumptions, recapitulate meetings both verbally at the end of the meeting and then follow up via email. The leader should encourage shyer members to speak up, and it may be helpful to make asking for clarification a group norm if something is not understood.

All of these aspects help businesses increase productivity. However, for teams to fully reach their potential – the disadvantages of cross cultural virtual teams must also be navigated. Some of the key disadvantages include the challenge of working across time zones, communication challenges and difference, and technical problems. These challenges are best managed with strong leadership. Key leadership skills

include cultural intelligence, an awareness of the various cultural factors that may impact working styles, communication and relations to leadership and power. Second, leaders should model clear communication and communicate using a variety of channels and not be afraid to over communicate or set clear expectations. Flexibility is also a key skill for leaders, a willingness to make decisions and lead in a new way, and a willingness to do what benefits other team members. All of these approaches help cross cultural teams develop trust which is essential for cross cultural virtual teams to work together. In conclusion, cross cultural teams represent a new way of doing business, while this change brings challenges it also represents a wonderful learning experience with the opportunity to not only learn about the world but also about ourselves.

In conclusion, there is no stopping of a global reach in the way we do business; however encouraging virtual cross cultural team in our organizations will help increase positive and effective communications. While organizations, whether corporate or non-governmental organizations, face real difficulties in today's global environment, the advantages of developing a cross cultural virtual team offsets the disadvantages through the opportunities to learn from other experts, being better prepared for the global market and the ability to work continuously across time zones.

Appendix

Figure 1.



From: <https://www.languageandculture.com/cultural-iceberg>

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