



## CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR TRUST BUILDING IN VIRTUAL MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 15 July 2023

Received in revised form

30 October 2023

Accepted 1 November 2023

Available online 8 November 2023

#### Key words:

### ABSTRACT

*The paper explores successful approaches to communication management of culturally diverse virtual teams. Virtual team leaders often face challenges when building trust among team members. The text presents how cultural diversity in teams influences communication practices, such as active listening, taking turns in conversations, negotiating agreements and following instructions from the team leader. The author suggests five solutions for global team managers: 1) creating common values that all members agree on; 2) observing and moderating discussions to ensure full participation; 3) managing time using a time-converging approach; 4) incorporating hierarchy perception when moderating discussions; 5) using translanguaging approach to maximize mutual understanding between participants.*

*Cultural diversity, Communication management, Trust building, Multicultural teams*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual team communication has become an integral part of teamwork in current organizational culture. The emerging digitalization of processes and tools calls for fast changes in communication approaches. Team leaders, as responsible for communication management, are the ones who build the trust in teams and direct the communication process. Participants in virtual team meetings on the other hand need to share common values, demonstrate cultural awareness and be able to cooperate successfully. The text discusses how

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multicultural leadership in the face of team managers influences team members to develop mutual trust during virtual team meetings.

## **2. CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRTUAL MULTICULTURAL TEAMS**

According to literature, virtual teams that function internationally, are represented in various terminology. Many authors (Cagiltay et al. 2015, Dumitraşcu-Băldău & Dumitrascu 2019, Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020, Zakaria 2020, Taras et. al. 2021, Muszyńska 2021, Zakaria & Ab Rahman Muton 2022) use various expressions, including *cross-cultural virtual teams*, *multicultural project-based teams*, *global virtual teams* or GVTs, *multinational virtual teams*, *globally distributed teams*, *culturally diverse virtual teams*, and many others.

Multicultural virtual teams, or MVTs, are based in temporary virtual collaboration that spans across different countries and time zones. Team members are summoned to complete a specific project task and have no background history. The multicultural virtual team is disassembled immediately after the work is finished. MVTs are geographically dispersed and multicultural in their composition (Dumitraşcu-Băldău & Dumitrascu 2019, Zakaria 2020). In most cases virtual teams are project-based and function temporarily. Therefore, the literature in this field studies predominantly temporary MVTs in business and education (Dumitraşcu-Băldău & Dumitrascu 2019, Davidavičienė et. al. 2020, Taras et. al. 2021, Muszyńska 2021, Zakaria & Ab Rahman Muton 2022).

*Intercultural communication in multicultural virtual teams* occurs in several environments: cultural context, micro-cultural context, virtual environment and socio-relational context (Dumitraşcu-Băldău & Dumitrascu, 2019). The cultural context exists as a basis for the other three communication environments. This means that it influences how project team culture unfolds during virtual interactions. There are synchronous and asynchronous tools in virtual meetings which are used to direct and carry out the communication process. Synchronous tools include online meeting tools such as Zoom; instant messaging tools like Viber, Skype, Messenger; online rooms for task completion, like in Zoom or Big Blue Button platforms. Asynchronous tools are e-mails (for follow-up communication) and fax (still available in some countries).

The most important characteristic of MVTs is the so called *swift trust*. According to Zakaria (2020) swift trust is a type of mutual trust in virtual teams that is temporary and dependent on team dynamics. Swift trust (Crisp and Jarvenpaa 2013) is based in broader categories like social and cultural values, time differences and it contribute to the performance of multicultural virtual teams. Swift trust forms during virtual meetings and exists only during these meetings. That is why it remains vulnerable to sustain. Zakaria (2020) suggests a ten-week strategy to promote swift trust building for multicultural virtual teams. The strategy includes *a sequence of five two-week stages*, where every two weeks the team leader promotes different behaviours. In the first week, the manager promotes *developing cultural awareness* among team members. The second stage is teaching participants about *culturally based agreements and disagreements*. Third stage includes *implementing the new team culture*

based in diversity. Fourth stage is *completing all planned tasks* and milestones, i.e. getting the job done. The last stage is promoting the established team spirit and *praising the achievements of the team*. This is a really important stage in promoting friendship and mutual respect.

### **3. COMMON PROBLEMS IN TRUST BUILDING FOR VIRTUAL MULTICULTURAL TEAMS**

According to literature review, the most commonly pursued themes in MVT management are those relating to methods and tools for communication, whereas concerns relating to communication and trust or leadership are lesser investigated (Muszyńska 2021). Thus focus should fall on the means *to improve communication as a way to build better trust*. Some authors (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020) identify a few challenges that can cause trust issues during virtual multicultural interactions. These challenges are rooted in the nature of virtual teams and include *physical distance, cultural perceptions of time, lack of background interactions, configuration of virtual teams and cultural diversity of team members*. Each member could also experience cognitive, social and emotional issues because of them (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020).

Other trust building issues include *perceptions of context* – team members from different locations and time zones cannot experience all aspects of the cultural context of the team. The virtual environment is accessible only through the camera and screen in a given online platform. That's why participants perceive the multicultural context only in part, in comparison to all of them being physically present in the same room. Another issue includes *relational interactions* between team members and the team manager, which are influenced by the cultural background of each participant. This way we would suggest that messages transmitted in multicultural virtual environment are not the messages received by participants (Dumitraşcu-Băldău & Dumitrascu, 2019), simply because *the cultural conditioning determines the message reception*.

According to Davidavičienė et al. (2020) there is a so called *Knowledge sharing measurement model* in MVTs. The model includes factors, internal and external to the team members, which influence the following: motivation, language, conflict, ICT usage, leadership, *trust* and culture in the MVTs. Interestingly, language competence of participants *does not influence* knowledge sharing but the other factors, such as culture, motivation, conflict, ICT competence, trust, and leadership, *have a direct effect on information exchange*. This is confirmed by Varhelahti and Turnquist (2021), who suggest that communication in project-based MVTs is facilitated by the diversity of participants. Their cultural identity, professional background and mother tongue have a role in mutual understanding. According to Varhelahti and Turnquist (2021) high level proficiency in English is not necessary, but using clear communication rules, easy to apply virtual technology and regular project meetings could lead to success in trust building.

During team meetings, *inclusive turn-taking* promotes performance, therefore higher trust levels. Inclusive turn-taking (Haan 2021) is a collective speaking pattern in which diverse team members speak in succession. In combination with finding meanings, *cross-cultural code-switching* also belongs to the means that build trust in MVTs. It is crucial to good cross-cultural performance and to adapting foreign team members' communicative behaviours in meetings. Successful approaches to using cross-cultural code-switching include directness in speech, openness during knowledge exchange, and task-oriented goals (Zakaria & Ab Rahman Muton 2022).

#### **4. PROMOTING HIGH-TRUST BEHAVIOURS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS**

According to Anawati and Craig (2006) *behavioral adaptation* can help in *building trust* in multicultural virtual teams through adapting leadership styles and communication strategies. In the first place, team leaders should be aware of cultural differences. Cultural sensitivity in such cases includes understanding the meaning of silence, praising and criticizing. Speaking clearly and avoiding slogans, collocations, jargon, and acronyms prevent from miscommunication with non-native speakers. These are sensitive subjects and could be offensive. Therefore, it is advisory to avoid them. Team leaders should restrain from humour and irony because such remarks can be interpreted negatively or incorrectly in some countries. Humour is culture specific and difficult to adapt to new cultural contexts. Paying attention to sound and voice quality is important for successful virtual communication. Change your voice tone and pace of speech when participating in audio and video conferences. Planning the dates for virtual meetings should be synchronized with national holidays and religious celebrations.

Another important component is the role of team leaders. Culturally competent team managers should be able to do the following (Taras 2021):

1. Understand the nature of the task at hand.
2. Pay attention to personal differences (age, gender and language fluency levels) besides the cultural traits.
3. Use contextual diversity as a basis for boosting creativity, decision-making and problem solving.

Cagiltay et al. (2015) suggest strategies to overcome issues arising from cultural and personality differences in MVTs. They include developing tolerance and acceptance to differences via a cultural orientation session at the beginning of the meeting. Encouraging motivation via kick-off events to create an informal communication environment. Developing empathetic skills, addressing interpersonal and group dynamics, paying attention arising conflicts based on culture, encouraging equal participation, giving timely and constructive feedback. These strategies are similar to previously mentioned authors' suggestions. Therefore, we can see a common set of solutions shared by a variety of authors, emphasizing *the role of the facilitator*, i.e. the team manager.

## **5. POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR MULTICULTURAL TEAM MANAGERS**

Based on the literature review so far, I offer a set of approaches how to build trust in MVTs:

**1) *Creating common values that all members agree on.*** This includes practicing *cultural relativism* - believing in all members' inherent value and abilities irrespective of their cultural identities; expressing interest in each culture's traditions; reduce judgments and invite each member to participate; ask the members to create their *common value framework*.

**2) *Observing and moderating discussions to ensure full participation.*** Stimulating the free exchange of ideas and knowledge. Asking for feedback, listening actively and boosting turn-taking in conversations. Acknowledging communication issues and misunderstandings to address interactional anxiety among participants. Encourage members to cooperate in smaller multicultural subgroups and to share their feedback to the whole team.

**3) *Managing time using a time-converging approach*** – teaching team members about perceptions of time in their native cultures and incorporating a flexible task and time management approaches.

**4) *Incorporating hierarchy perception when moderating discussions*** – teaching about hierarchy in different cultures when moderating discussions. Asking participants to share about hierarchy in their own cultures and thus boost knowledge exchange.

**5) *Using translanguaging approach to maximize mutual understanding between participants.*** This approach (Wei 2017) includes grouping participants in subgroups according to their native tongue. The point is to delegate tasks and let members solve them in their native language and in the most convenient communication context. This way misunderstandings are reduced naturally. After the task is completed, the subgroup shares the results with the rest of the team. This approach could be extended for several virtual meetings for best results.

Consequently, I suggest a timeline for successful multicultural virtual meetings:

1. A preliminary meeting for all team members. Semi-formal and meant to help members get to know each other interculturally, including the team manager. Building common team values.
2. First main meeting to address the team goals. It is preferable to be done face-to-face if possible. Setting deadlines for tasks and clarifying major questions from team members.
3. Additional shorter meetings, mostly via instant messaging tools, to give feedback and follow up with progress.
4. Second main meeting to address progress in the main tasks. Asking for detailed feedback and finding solutions. Could be done virtually and/or in person.
5. Additional shorter virtual meetings to fix minor issues.

6. Third or final meeting to conclude the completion of project. Should be done face-to-face if possible. All team members should be present. The goal is to re-establish the trust and the friendly relationships in the team.

Depending on project type and its duration, team managers choose how many meetings they need. Usually, a multicultural project-teams needs at least one face-to-face meeting during the project to re-establish trust and follow up with the results (Cagiltay et al. 2015).

Finally, I would like to suggest testing the approaches in a focus group and extending the research further to a wide number of MVTs.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Trust building in multicultural virtual teams is considered a significant challenge, albeit underestimated in practice. This text attempts to add a conceptual contribution to the issue and suggest a scope for further research on the matter. Multiculturality in business is going to become more prevalent, rather than less, due to the increasing internationalization of enterprises. Team spirit should remain in the focus of business leaders, especially if they want to improve the efficiency of their teams.

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