

Virtual Teams and Cultural Diversity

By Tom Verghese

In today's global village environment doing business increasingly means operating in a virtual environment. A virtual team can consist of members across towns, countries and time zones.

A virtual team is not that different from a team that meets face-to-face. All teams require similar foundations; they all need a healthy degree of trust, accountability, defined roles, and good leadership. Common intentions, purposes, and goals are the distinguishing features of a team.

Virtual teams working across borders are being established for a variety of reasons such as:

- The pursuit of resources in other markets.
- Company mergers and acquisitions.
- A limited potential for growth at home.
- Sourcing of human capital talent from the global arena.

While virtual teams have many virtues – they can be faster, smarter, more flexible and adaptable, thereby providing greater opportunities to use talent – they also need to be well designed, resourced, managed and supported, or they will fail.

This Discussion Paper will focus on some current challenges that face culturally diverse virtual teams; communication and trust being the critical factors. It will then discuss the Three Cultures map that Cultural Synergies has identified and promotes as being the three key areas that are essential for the success of any global virtual team.

Challenges

We must be able to adapt to and leverage on the different work styles and cultures and utilize appropriate technologies to create efficiencies in the global workplace.

Some of the key challenges for culturally diverse virtual teams are:

- The need to focus on relationships before tasks.

- The very word ‘team’, which has different cultural meanings, i.e. different perceptions and ways of identifying with the group and different understandings of what is appropriate team behaviour.

Communication

Due to the geographical distance separating their members, virtual teams rely on communication and information technologies to facilitate interaction and coordinate work.

Communication is a critical factor for any team but particularly for virtual teams that are also culturally diverse. Mehrabian in his study conducted in the 1960’s highlighted the effectiveness of human communication.

Mehrabian’s experiments showed that in interpersonal communication, less than 7% of the meaning of a communication is contained in the words, some 38% of the meaning is contained in the pitch, tone, emphasis and volume of the words, and the bulk of the meaning, some 55%, is contained in body language and context (see Figure 1).

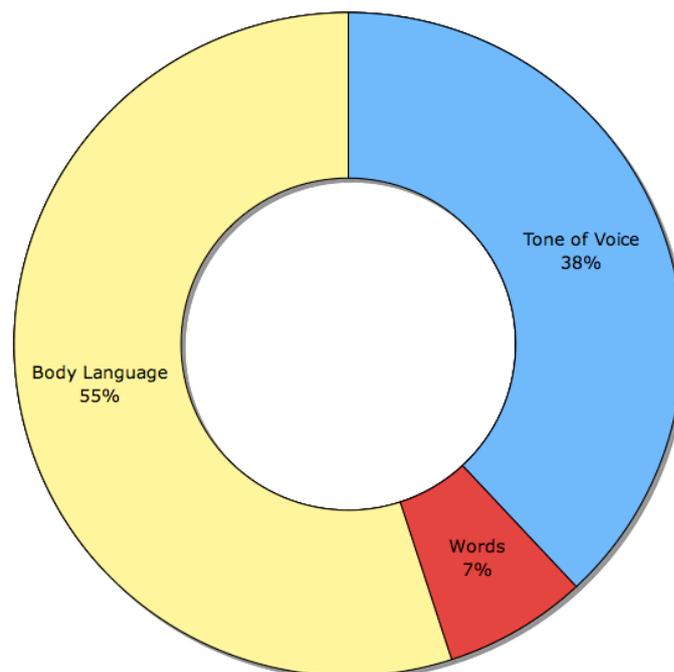


Figure 1
Mehrabian 1972

While people are often shocked when they first hear this, they accept it fairly quickly. In virtual teams that communicate in languages that are often not a person’s first language, the potential for misunderstanding is high. Mehrabian’s findings demonstrate that the bulk of meaning is communicated via body language and context, both of which are difficult to grasp in a virtual

team. But, if words and meanings are misinterpreted because of cultural differences, body language can provide important cues.

These are the three areas that must be considered when designing a collaborative team environment:

- People
- Process
- Technology

These components make up the bulk of the team and its communication styles.

The way in which we communicate is enormously influenced by our cultural conditioning. Culture poses communication problems because there are so many variables unknown to the communicators. For the person working and communicating in a multicultural environment, we must remember that the message that ultimately counts is the one that the other person gets or creates in their mind, not the one we send.

There is potential for missing half the message when it is verbal and not visual. Virtual communication requires a high degree of self-awareness. The most useful degree of self-awareness in global teams comes from being aware of our own cultural bias (which is heavily influenced by our personal culture).

All effective communication begins with attitude, a genuine desire to understand and to be understood. Ultimately it is imperative to take responsibility to make ourselves understood when we are communicating, particularly when we are working with people whose first language is different from our own.

Trust

Trust is the essential ingredient for a successful team. Effective communication will produce a healthy degree of trust and let's face it, a large component of success in any setting, not just work teams, is based on trust. It doesn't mean the members have to like each other, but they do have to be able to understand and rely on each other. Trust is the 'glue' of the virtual workplace.

Patrick Lencioni in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* says trust is the foundation for a functional team. Trust is the basis of a team as it is the foundation where real teamwork begins (see Figure 2). Without trust admission of weaknesses and mistakes is met with fear of reprisals, and asking for help becomes more difficult if there is little trust.



Figure 2

(Lencioni 2002)

Trust is closely linked to confidence. Virtual teamwork offers a different set of opportunities for virtual working teams to get to know each other. When establishing trust in virtual working teams there are underlying cultural aspects of trust that must be recognized. A lack of trust can result in a lot of wasted time managing behaviours and interactions between team members. Lack of trust can create a reluctance to take risks or ask for assistance, it can lead to low morale and ultimately high staff turnover. It is important that members of the team have the confidence to speak up or offer suggestions.

People tend to trust those whom they perceive as similar to themselves, so trust is difficult to establish in virtual teams where members are likely to have different backgrounds, experiences, and cultures.

The Three Cultures

The Three Cultures map shows how both trust and communication are developed and reached via a three-tiered approach (see Figure 3).

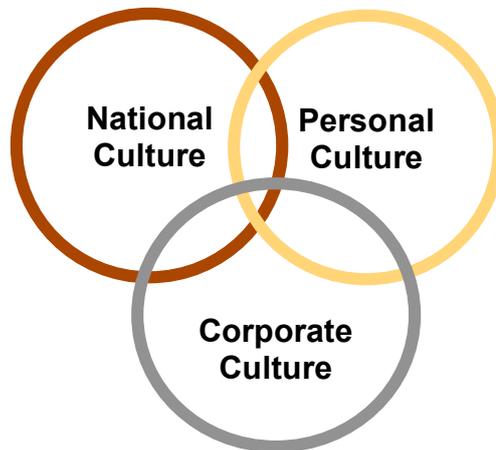


Figure 3

(Gardenswartz, Rowe, Digh & Bennett, 2003)

The three cultures, national, personal, and corporate are separate entities and interlinked with one another. When we are working in virtual teams across borders we are clearly working within these three cultures.

The unique individual operates within their own culture, which is responsible for establishing the foundations from which we make judgments, form opinions and formalize decisions. There may be several national cultures that are represented and even within the corporate culture there are often differences. These appear at first glance to be subtle, but once we go below the surface the organizational culture can be significantly different between offices and countries.

Once team members are sufficiently aware of their own enculturation they can then see how comprehensively it affects their own decision making, particularly in the area of developing trust and communication techniques. Team members can then progress to understanding other cultures and begin learning how to build trust with people from different cultures. This will improve their understanding not only of the things that are said but also of those that are not said.

Conclusion

The greater the geographical dispersion of the team, the more likely the team will have members that are quite different from one another. We recognize that the diversity and virtual elements of virtual teams can increase ambiguity and complexity because the potential for misperception, misinterpretation, misevaluation and miscommunication is far greater.

Typically virtual teams are slow to start but when managed effectively and well resourced they can out perform traditional teams in terms of creativity and responsiveness. The success of a culturally diverse virtual team will largely depend on how the diversity is managed.

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