Managing Multicultural Teams

The challenges of sustaining remote multicultural team performance

When a multicultural team like Gavin’s collaborates remotely, there are five additional challenges to manage: how to build, sustain and repair TRUST at a distance; how to ensure everyone maintains a collective FOCUS on the team’s shared purpose; how to negotiate the different EXPECTATIONS about working together by optimizing the different channels of communication available; how to align with and INFLUENCE each other’s and the team’s key stakeholders and sponsors; how to maintain RELEVANCE as the organizational priorities change.

David Trickey & Tim Hill explore the challenges and possible responses.

Building your trust bank

One of the critical factors which distinguishes high performing multicultural remote teams is their ability to consciously create and develop trust that meets differing needs within the team. Those who manage to do this find that trust acts as both a lubricant, bringing out the best in their cooperation, and as the glue that binds them together across distance and cultural diversity. Trust becomes harder to give because distance impacts on our sense of the presence and memory of others. Misunderstandings become endemic as people become less real and less attached to us emotionally. Loyalties to the team may be less compelling than loyalties to the local office. So, ‘out of sight and out of mind’.

As we saw in Gavin’s team, people can have a slightly different set of ‘high priority trust needs’ compared to what we would instinctively require ourselves. What I want from you to trust you may not be what you want from me for you to trust me. For example, the high and low context preferences explored in this third module can have a strong impact on our perceptions that others are trustworthy or not. The lower context communicator may be looking for a clear match between what people say (making promises) and what they actually do (delivery on promises). On the other hand, higher context communicators may be
Looking more for an intrinsic investment in the relationship beyond the short term requirements of the functional needs of our role. They may also be much more sensitive to reading between the lines of what people say and don’t say and may, therefore, interpret comments in an email with a degree of paranoia if the relationship has not been carefully established previously.

Without trust, we will always be cautious about the risk that others could take advantage of our weaknesses if we expose them. If there is a communication breakdown, we are more likely to fill the gaps in understanding with negative interpretations of the other person’s intent towards us. On the other hand, if we have consolidated a strong basis of trust between us, even if we have a misunderstanding we would generally give the other person the benefit of the doubt when interpreting their intentions: “He’s just had a bad day – like we all have”. By building a trust bank, people can then make ‘withdrawals’ since, at a distance, we are often faced with the stress of guessing people’s real motives. Why? Because different cultural norms and a lack of mutual understanding of each other’s local context can lead to a perception that other team members behave unpredictably. Why didn’t he get back to me today on this urgent issue? Why didn’t he mention this problem to me earlier? Why didn’t she tell me directly she needed my help?

In virtual contexts it is harder to know when there is a conflict ‘in the air’. As the intercultural author George Simons says, “In virtual teams, we know even less about what we don’t know and how it may show up”. However, with higher levels of trust, people are more able to put uncomfortable issues on the table and conflicts can be dealt with before they become toxic and cause irreversible breakdowns in relationships.

Frame your own approach to others so that they understand where you are coming from – not just out of a black box. Comment on your own style and how that might impact on others positively and negatively. Explain your context, why you are requesting what you are requesting and how it fits into a wider organisation context, set of practices or expected behaviours locally.

For example, in an email with a new counterpart who you suspect may have a higher context email style than your own, you could say: “It’s typical for us here in country X to be pretty direct in giving feedback; people don’t take it personally since we tend to separate personal and professional activity, and it usually helps us put things on the table fast. But I do see how it could appear a bit pushy to some people where you come from in country Y”. When writing to a higher context colleagues you could say: “It’s more typical for us here in country X to be very cautious about giving direct feedback until we have got to know people better at a personal level. This takes longer, but it helps us to be much faster once the relationships are established. I can imagine others could see this as slow and avoiding conflict, but investing in relationship building is an important part of our cultural background and is a key to getting things done.”
Keeping the team vision alive when apart

One of the challenges of working remotely is how to keep everyone’s energy focused on the team’s primary goals when they are apart. In fact, a team is a team precisely because its members work interdependently to reach common objectives. If not, we’re talking about a group of individuals. When the team regularly meets up face-to-face, members have the chance to be reminded of their shared purpose in working together and they can develop a strong sense of ‘teamness’. At a distance, however, it is difficult to keep a strong sense of common purpose. The virtual ‘we’ can easily break down as people become distracted by local pressures and loyalties.

One way of dealing with a blurring of focus is to negotiate a common purpose statement within the team during one of the early face-to-face meetings. It can then be posted on all email signatures, and act as a reminder of ‘why we exist as a team’ at the start of meetings and teleconferences. By having such a statement in place, the team’s priorities are always in the foreground. This acts as a kind of compass and ensures that our common purpose is present in our minds, even though we are physically absent from each other.

5 steps to a common purpose statement

1. Ask in plenary, ‘Why do we need a ‘common purpose?’ [rationale]. ‘Why do we need to be a team?’ Obvious, but ask it. ‘What can be the benefits of defining, agreeing to, aligning around and committing to a common purpose?’ [mutual benefits] . ‘What is stopping us from creating one we could all subscribe to?’ [barriers]

2. Reflect on the question, ‘To what degree do you think there is a clear common purpose or priority focus within the team?’ Participants come up and put a cross on a flipchart with a 0% to 100% line reflecting the degree of perception that we already have a common purpose around which we all align on a day-to-day basis.

3. Then, ask each person individually to note down their definition of what our common purpose should be (maximum 15 words).

4. Explain that a common purpose is partly about solving a problem that others can’t resolve… so what makes us unique as a team in being able to deliver on this project? Get smaller groups of about 3-6 people to develop the common purpose statement out of the key elements of each definition created. Ensure that everyone feels there is ‘part of their soul’ in the final statement.

5. Challenge language in the statement to ensure everyone fully understands exactly what the words mean — eg: “what does efficiency mean? What are our criteria for efficiency?” - and to ensure that they send out the same message in their part of the organization or to clients, sponsors and stakeholders.
The third aspect to handle with care, at a distance, is the instinctive expectations people with diverse cultural backgrounds can bring to the ‘most appropriate’ working and communication style in pursuing the team’s common purpose. This is about how we work together to achieve our goals. It is challenging to gain a sense of commonality around such sensitive process issues as the role of emails (who to cc, when to defer a call, response time expectations etc), the choice of language and the appropriate etiquette in teleconferences. Creating ground rules, rather than allowing each cultural group to go their own way, provides an opportunity to create a project culture that can help build longer-term commitment. The simple process of allowing everyone to be heard on their preferences both sensitises the group to diverse needs and allows people to feel heard. This makes it easier to commit to any decisions made.

For example, on average, 50% of communication in remote teams is still mediated through email. The team needs to negotiate how much context should be provided in a response. Should we keep things short and simple or do we need to provide explanations to more fully understand the complexities of our local context? How much should we focus on rapport and positive relationships and how much on transparency and clarity? When should an email become a call and when should a call become an email?

Build your trust bank virtually

**Deliver on Promises.** When you promise – do it! Always. Never promising to do anything is not an alternative. Lead with fewer words about what you will do and more action. The quickest way to break trust is to promise and then not to deliver. But, of course, be careful that as a lower context communicator you haven’t forced the other higher context communicator into making a promise they can’t keep. Check the real constraints by asking something like: “what could impact on your ability to meet this promise? For example, how supportive is your direct manager on this issue?” The second quickest way to break trust is to be known as someone who never commits to do anything! Both types of people are always full of complicated excuses….which we don’t really believe.

**Extend trust to others.** You have to give trust to get it. Incrementally extend your trust towards colleagues – adding 10% at a time. Most people want to deserve your trust. High trust increases the speed of work, increases motivation & energy and lowers costs. The team earns a trust dividend. Suffocating control through checking and double checking is the opposite of trust, but is often the focus of many teleconferences. Untrusting control slows everything down, reduces personal motivation & energy and increases costs. The team pays a trust tax.
Insights into the high and low context preferences of your colleagues can build your sensitivity to whether an email is enough or if it’s time to pick up the phone. So, multicultural teams need to ensure that there is a healthy and culturally sensitive balance between focusing on task and relationship-building within a project.

By reviewing the channels of communication you have available to you and discussing how best to match them with the key tasks you will need to face, the team can build its own charter for communication at a distance based on an understanding of everyone’s needs.

Knowing what culturally different (or simply different) colleagues expect and need from you in a virtual project is a prerequisite for a key aspect of trust, namely the perception that others are exchanging information with each other proactively. A simple thing to do is simply to ask them.

- “What do you expect and need from me on this project for you to contribute yourself at the highest level?”
- “Where do you need more or less involvement/information/support from me?”
- “This is obviously a key need for you. Could you help us to understand why this is so important (in your context)?”

If everyone did this with team members in the early stages (e.g., using a teleconference or sending round a questionnaire), considerable misunderstanding and misjudgement could be avoided in virtual working. Sometimes people simply don’t know what others need, or if they do, they don’t understand why they need it and so are demotivated to put them at the top of the agenda.

Another approach to match needs and expectations is on the HOW side rather than the WHAT or content side. Generally we feel more positively disposed to support people who can synchronise their own style of communicating with our own (e.g., high or low context; emotional or neutral; logical or intuitive). So, as long as you are not compromising your ultimate goals and personal beliefs, focus on mirroring and matching the style of your colleagues. Not monkeying, but simply softening your own default style which seems to be in direct contrast to theirs. You may be surprised that a small ‘adjustment’ in your own style can completely change the chemistry of the relationship…and make the substantive issues more easily dealt with.

For example, below are ways for higher context communicators to adapt to low context colleagues and vice-versa:

**FOR LOW CONTEXT COMMUNICATORS WORKING WITH HIGHER CONTEXT COLLEAGUES:**
- Blame communication, not your counterpart.
- Recycle key points (paraphrase and give examples and reasons etc.)
- Don’t assume understanding or ask whether you are understood. Ask how your idea may work for them.
- Explore the meaning of ‘yes’. Do not assume agreement.
- Find less direct ways of giving feedback.
- Use higher context modes of communication to show interest in the relationship (e.g., pick up the phone BEFORE sending the email).
- Don’t underestimate the need to constantly explain operational priorities and personal intentions.

**FOR HIGH CONTEXT COMMUNICATORS WORKING WITH LOW CONTEXT COLLEAGUES:**
- Get to the point quickly, and limit background information. If they need more info, they will ask.
- State your points clearly, using a direct ‘yes’ or ‘no’ when accurate.
- Use data and facts to support your points.
- Don’t take a criticism of your idea personally.
- Be ready to use email to give strong opinions when it’s appropriate.
- Don’t assume that someone who asks you a lot of questions is challenging or attacking you.
- Don’t ‘read between the lines’ too much. Clarify when in doubt.
Remember that a strategy for success with a remote multicultural team is 90% about people and only 10% about technology. The choices about technology should always be based on how best to nurture and develop the human relations in need of connection at the ends of the technological links.

For example, you could:

- Develop a ‘virtual team home’ where members can share information (and gossip, why not!), get big picture updates, ask for help from the team, engage in threaded discussions, monitor each other’s engagement (peer pressure is a useful stimulus), store key documents and resources and generally get to know one another through profiles.

- Create ways for team members to interact informally to simulate ‘corridor or coffee break chats’. Use real-time communication tools like instant messaging (IM) or social media sites to communicate more spontaneously.

- Find ways to “spotlight” team members in the virtual home through regular newsletters

- Celebrate and promote the team’s achievements, both within the team and across the organisation

- Ensure that people look forward to teleconferences as ‘can’t miss’ events: involve everyone in prioritising agenda items using a simple online survey giving their prioritisation to each item, ensure you start with breaking news, engage everyone, rotate a process leader to manage interaction, use real-time polls to get quieter voices involved and to generate heat around topics, discourage status reports, follow up with an (anonymous) evaluation of the event and suggestions for improvements.

- Partner team members at different locations on projects and rotate these periodically to ensure everyone experiences a range of bilateral relationships across the dispersed team.

Use limited face-to-face time to deal with tough issues and build trust. Meeting up together in the same place is a rarity for virtual teams and should be treated as precious. Many teams can underutilise this time by focusing on information exchanges and PowerPoint presentations which could be better handled at a distance. Use this time instead to negotiate sensitive issues facing the team which can’t be dealt with easily by email or over the phone.

Remember that in person-to-person meetings you have a full range of options to get more subtle messages across. Apart from words you can see everyone’s reactions to what is said in real time and, if needed, adjust your message accordingly; you can use non-verbal communication and intonation to soften or emphasize your messages; you have informal corridor, coffee break and lunchtime opportunities to learn about each other as people and connect at a deeper level with their needs; you also have that special ‘chemistry’ of sharing the same real-time space together, which even the latest ‘telepresence’ video conferencing facilities can’t yet reproduce.

These aspects of ‘enhanced context’ mean that this is definitely the best time to repair a relationship in difficulty, re-engage the team’s commitment to its goals, energise everyone about the future, ask tough questions like “What can each of us in the team do to meet people’s unmet needs so we can all trust each other more?”…and then work through that difficult conversation together. To support the quieter and higher context members, you could first give them a chance to note down their responses. Then acknowledge everyone’s feelings and all focus on understanding and helping people to satisfy their (often) unspoken needs.
The last key factor for geographically dispersed teams is how to monitor the relevance of the team’s activity with regards to the shifting priorities at the top of the organisation. Remote team members can feel distant and unconnected to any corporate ‘centre’. They often don’t know the latest buzz words or the latest priority in the board room. Geography, language and culture can exclude them from the usual corridor conversations which connect people to an organisation and allow them to be ‘present’. They feel ‘absent’ from the thinking of their sponsors and stakeholders and, in turn, these key people are usually absent from many team members’ daily world. So, ensuring that the team leader updates everyone on ‘what’s cooking, who’s cooking it, why the recipe is so important in Headquarters’ can be essential information if you are on the edge the corporate empire.

As Moran et al say in Intercultural Competence in Business – Leading Global Projects:

“Entrenching the project within the strategic parameters of the organisation enables project leaders to communicate how their projects contribute various forms of value to the organisation….Thus the leader who positions the project with the organisational strategy at the forefront is more likely to find success than one who simply focuses on the project itself.”

A key role of the team leader, then, is to be an advocate for the team to guarantee continued support for its mission and to acquire the necessary resources to achieve its goals. This requires remote team leaders to be strongly grounded in the company culture and connected to networks at the highest levels, acting as a conduit between the centres of power and the individual team members; making the local comprehensible to the global and the global to the local offices. Conducting a stakeholder analysis which includes key people in the local offices of each team member as well as in any organisational ‘centres’ can be a simple but powerful way to clarify what networks the team will collectively need to nurture. Managing webs of cooperative relationships and being trusted by higher level executives is not about organisational politics. It’s about getting the necessary support, current information, advice, ideas, feedback, resources, contacts, risk management and advanced warning of organisational changes affecting the team.

The rise in virtual working has made two competencies essential. Remote collaboration breaks down the command and control tradition of management where trust is becoming the new control. So, the first competency outlined in the beginning of this document is the ability to build, inspire and extend trust. The second is the ability to influence others. This is needed both within the team, since virtual work means leaders can no longer manage by physically looking over people’s shoulders, and outside the team, namely with other teams, stakeholders and sponsors on whom the team depends for resources, support and visibility.
Influencing refers to changing people’s opinions and/or behaviours from what they would otherwise have been. Generally, influencing is a longer-term process than convincing or persuading, both of which convey a feeling of ‘winning over’ or possibly even ‘talking into’. Influencing often involves working more at the sub-conscious and intuitive level.

Attempts to influence can have three outcomes that can be viewed on a scale:

- **Commitment** – the person being influenced intrinsically agrees with a decision or request from the person influencing. The recipient will usually make a great effort to fulfill the agent’s request. It involves an emotional connection with the task or issue in hand.

- **Compliance** – the person being influenced agrees with a decision or request from the person influencing, but is indifferent or even apathetic and uses basic or minimal effort to make something happen. Often, for routine matters, compliance may be all that is necessary.

- **Resistance** – the person being influenced avoids doing the action or task requested, often making excuses for lack of action. Resistance can be active or passive or both.

There are four ‘influence tactics’ which have been shown to be effective for securing as much commitment as possible. Assuming the person influencing has already built the required level of trust, the tactics are:

- **Rational Persuasion** – the use of facts and logic to support a proposal. This is the most frequently used tactic in all countries.

- **Inspirational Appeals** – reaching out to connect to a person’s ideals and values.

- **Consultation** – involving the person and drawing on their input, especially one-to-one.

- **Collaboration** – working with or at least helping the person carry out a request or tackle a problem.

Build openness. Admit mistakes. Doing it right first time is for hospital operations; be humble. Encourage EVERYONE to speak up. Defend the quiet voices during teleconferences; their ideas are often valuable but lost. Share the larger organisational context you have access to with people. No one working in your organisation is perfect. People close down with colleagues who are not confidently self-critical, and regularly blame or judge others. Dominating and aggressive behaviour (even when you have the excuse of ‘frustration’) when you have a bit of authority or informal influence is abusing power – again people shut down. Colleagues who don’t share their wider understanding of the organisation are seen as secretive.
These tactics work at distance as well as across cultures, though some skill and care are needed in their adaptation, as they can differ in their importance and effectiveness across different cultures. Rational persuasion may appear in very different forms in international contexts, not least regarding the level of detail and at what point (beginning or end) conclusions are drawn. Inspirational tactics in the US may be associated with energy and passion, whereas a more low-key appeal may be the norm in Asia or Northern Europe. Often a simple question, even a rhetorical one, eg. “What is really important for you (all) here?” may be all that is needed to produce a motivated response in an individual or a group. Collaboration and Consultation are more used, and more likely to be effective, in cultures characterized by low power distance and individualism (see module 2). More hierarchical and collective cultures often expect more direction and traditional leadership, but it is worth noting that pressure tactics (the use of threats or persistent reminders) appeals to a higher authority, and citing procedures, rules and regulations seem to be universally the least likely to create real commitment and engage a workforce longer-term.

The lesson for influencing seems to be that although people may be completing tasks, they are perhaps not always intrinsically engaged if over-pushy tactics are used. What is more, considering the three-part scale above, resistance will very often be passive rather than open rebellion! It is vital to use this research as a starting point for finding where your ‘true north’ is on the journey to securing others’ commitment.

## Finding the team’s balance

1. The crucial point is that a balance of advocacy (primarily ‘making your case’) and inquiry (listening and asking) combined with a ratio of just under 3:1 positive to negative interactions during team meetings is the key to dramatic productivity growth – or ‘flourishing’ (Losada et al). Positive reactions are, not surprisingly, using such as phrases as “That sounds interesting” or “Please go on”, though of course communicating openness and acceptance can also be done by non-verbal means. This is, of course, not the same as agreeing at a substantive level - indeed it is the opposite, as it involves handling different viewpoints effectively. In short, a high performing team has a good balance of advocacy and inquiry and a minimum of 3:1 positive interactions.

2. Negative reactions in a team interaction would obviously include language such as “That is ridiculous” or being sarcastic, discounting not only the idea but the person as well. Though research indicates, however, that there is a tipping point if too much positivity is used – around 11:1, meaning that appropriate negativity has its role and should not be covered with ‘ritual politeness’.

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Based on Losada, M (1999 The complex dynamic of high performance teams)

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<th>Positivity</th>
<th>Inquiry</th>
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<td>High performance teams</td>
<td>Medium performance teams (start of meeting)</td>
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<td>(end of meeting)</td>
<td>Low performance teams</td>
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Advocacy

Negativity
In module 3 you explored some of problems Gavin and the team faced when working at a distance. To conclude, we include some of the challenges and possible responses by the team leader in taking a remote multicultural team forward through some typical stages in its development. The stages refer to Tuckman’s well known forming, storming, norming, performing model.

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<th>WHAT IS HAPPENING AT EACH STAGE</th>
<th>CHALLENGES IN A VIRTUAL CONTEXT</th>
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| **FORMING** | • Getting to know each other, exchanging information, beginning to build trust. | • Fewer chances for informal, especially bilateral, conversations.  
• Risk of projecting stereotypical conclusions based on absence of information, impressions and feedback.  
• Deeper cultural and interpersonal needs harder to recognize and address.  
• Trust can be slower to develop. |
| **STORMING** | • Group members move for position and conflicts emerge as the group tries to identify competence, roles and responsibilities.  
• Less rich communication can make conflicts worse, especially in terms of continuing to make assumptions or passively withdrawing.  
• Danger of subgroups forming around language, culture previous relationships, or even differing needs for inclusion, control and one-to-one relationship building. | • Difficulties can arise around different expectations of commutation, attitudes to deadlines and use of email or other technology that does not allow instant feedback.  
• Cultural differences (e.g. levels of directness and indirectness) and differing understanding of what has been agreed can cause problems. |
| **NORMING** | • Team members have agreed on ways of working together and relationships are developing. | • Even greater vulnerability of being pulled into local projects. Continuing issues over communication and other norms and expectations over deliverables.  
• Danger of slipping back into earlier phases – not immediately apparent due to virtual nature of work. |
| **PERFORMING** | • Team members support each other and hold each other accountable in service of a higher objective. | |

Virtual teams often ‘storm to form’. The lack of physical presence seems to mean that the caution associated with the forming phase is replaced with more of a storming mode.
### Team Leader’s Areas of Focus

#### Forming
- Ensure higher level sponsorship for teams goals.
- If possible meet face-to-face (but can also be effective later).
- Explain purpose for project and reasons why.
- Allow team identity to develop around those goals.
- Use creative techniques and technologies for members to get to know each other personally and in terms of competence.
- Begin to build with the team an idea of what collective success will really look like.
- Assume nothing is ‘obvious’ at either a relationship or task level.
- Jointly work out how to keep support for project at a senior level.
- Be aware of ‘swift trust’ criteria: extending trust, exchanging information proactively, delivering on promises and being competent are the basics of virtual trust.

#### Storming
- Do not suppress differences or conflict, but allow people to reaffirm their own identity, style, needs and viewpoint.
- Be aware of passive and latent behaviours.
- Allow and encourage people to work around differences.
- Allow sub-groups to interact among themselves and with local stakeholders, but intervene if in a very negative spiral.
- Put people together in sub-groups who don’t know each other.
- Never try to smooth over differences or force the pace with words alone.
- Remember new members joining will (briefly) take you back in the cycle.

#### Norming
- At end of storming phase produce team charter with as much collaboration as possible, including expectations around technology.
- Revisit not only purpose of team but reemphasize what collective success will really look like.
- Establish roles, deliverables and accountabilities.
- Assume ‘role clarity, task ambiguity’ motivate most, i.e. extremely clear on deliverables, with flexibility in how to achieve them.
- Check back on members’ own mental models of what has been agreed.
- Be available in multiple support modes, from directive to coach approach.
- Consider using a process leader (the ‘how’ we are working) and a content leader (‘what’ are we doing), and rotating these roles.
- Ensure team has regular interaction (‘a heartbeat’) and access to common team knowledge or social platforms.

#### Performing
- Be aware of best practice for high-performing teams and model that behaviour.
- Ensure higher management support and check for members and resources being pulled into other projects.
- Be willing to confront team with issues which may see them slip back to an earlier phase.
- Continue to ensure the team has a ‘heartbeat’.
- Be transparent about need to adjust and resynchronize roles as circumstances change.
- Consider commitment as something to be renewed. Allow people to communicate (changed) feeling.
- Keep senior management informed and explain how the team’s work is of benefit to the organization.
- Never assume ‘no feedback is good feedback’.