

# The Challenges Impacting Virtual Cross Cultural Teams

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## **Introduction**

Understanding the impact cross cultural teams have on the success of an organization has become a top priority among managers. In a recent survey completed of 70 global teams, only 18% considered their team performance highly successful and achieving business goals (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001). Learning how best to develop virtual cross cultural teams in a constantly evolving business world is even more important as team members from around the world join virtual project teams. As technology and globalization continue to transform the workplace, people from many different cultural backgrounds are beginning to work together (Zofi, 2012). Developing teams to understand and appreciate differences while motivating employees in a virtual environment is a new challenge many managers are now facing (Rohm, 2011). Global leaders are now identifying a new subset of skills and talents required to effectively lead teams as organizations leverage team members from around the globe (Evans, 2006). This paper will look at the ways in which businesses are encouraging virtual cross cultural team development within the framework of the company's organizational structure and what tools businesses have adapted to assist with the development of a cohesive virtual cross cultural team.

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### **Understanding culture**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines culture as the beliefs, customs, arts, etc, of a particular society, group, place or time as well as a way of thinking, behaving, or working that exists in a place or organization. Understanding the importance of cultural differences and the context of social cues, both verbal and nonverbal, can be extremely important when working with colleagues from around the world. (Zofi, 2012). A founding researcher in the area of cross cultural groups is Geert Hofstede, who's work in the early 1970's has lead to continuous research and development in the area of cultural differences. Hofstede's research enabled him to create a value system around various dimensions of culture based on research conducted from interviews of more than 100,000 IBM employees across more than 50 national subsidiaries. These value systems help to identify how humans approach different situations from emotional, mental and behavioral perspectives based on the cultural values within each area.

### **Understanding the importance of trust in a virtual cross cultural environment**

The concept and meaning of "team" varies significantly across cultures and organizations; therefore it is imperative to note that behaviors and communication styles will likely vary as well. Establishing a 'we-feeling' and commitment are the first steps in collaboration (Toprak & Genc-Kumtepe, 2014). Within some countries around the world trust is an earned respect not easily given; therefore establishing a trusting relationship virtually requires careful precision and finesse to ensure the relationship is built upon mutual trust and respect. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) studied the concept of "swift" trust, noting that this type of trust is very fragile and temporal in nature. They further noted global virtual teams do not build trust, but import trust from more familiar settings

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and place a high value on timely responses with regard to communication (Toprak, & Genc-Kumtepe, 2014). It is in these situations the old adage “you never get a second chance to make a first impression” is paramount in trying to establish cross cultural virtual teams (Zakaria & Mohd Yusof, 2005).

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### **Overcoming the barriers language creates**

A barrier many cross cultural teams work through is the language barrier which stems beyond simply understanding the business language, but also understanding that a word or phrase can have significantly different meanings based on the culture a colleague comes from (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001). Zofi (2012) speaks to the importance of overcoming intercultural disconnect using five cross cultural communication strategies which can be easily remembered using the acronym LEARN.

- Listen
- Effectively Communicate
- Avoid Ambiguity
- Respect Differences
- No Judgment

By actively focusing on these five strategies of communication in multicultural teams, team members can speak openly and discuss areas of confusion without losing face among colleagues and enrich the development of all team members.

### **Understanding the limits of technology**

Technology, while great at connecting people around the world, creates additional challenges for people to notice and pick up on many nonverbal behavioral cues. Even with the recent introduction of video conferencing, subtle nonverbal cues often go unnoticed (Zakaria & Mohd Yusof, 2005). Marshall McLuhan famously stated “the medium is the message” which sheds light on the focus not completely being on the content of the message, but the medium itself which affects the human behavior and response (Toprak & Genc-Kumtepe, 2014). This further strengthens the position that teleconferencing platforms should not be used as a replacement for face to face

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communication whenever possible as it limits the ability to develop relationships (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001).

In recent years, the use of technology and globalization have been accused of homogenizing particular ways of working and studying to align more with Western behaviors. Some question if this protocol is ethical to ignore local cultural preferences to achieve collaboration on a higher level as it can later manifest as a cause of communication problems (Toprak & Genc-Kumtepe, 2014).

### **Motivating & training cross cultural virtual teams**

Motivational and training aspects of a manager's role can be further complicated by the degree of differences in employee cultures. What acts as a motivator within one culture is likely to have a different impact within another; this also holds true for employee development and the educational approach needed to properly train staff to use new technologies, which will assist in the continuation of cross cultural projects. The challenges managers increasingly face on an international level deal with a person's cultural values, which are likely a reflection of the cultural values of the society in which they live (Zakaria & Mohd Yusof, 2005). Therefore ensuring the proper delivery of messaging is imperative in a global marketplace to ensure no one loses face or unintentionally destroys relationships based on unknown cultural behaviors.

To offset these challenges facing today's global marketplace, many organizations are introducing balanced training programs to ensure team members achieve a healthy balance of intercultural skill development and technological development to further develop leadership potential in a high performance, high cooperation workplace (Zakaria & Mohd Yusof, 2005).

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Cross cultural competence training is an example of intercultural skill development which stresses an individualistic approach to certain attitudes, skills, and knowledge for leadership. Hofstede believes these skills can be taught to managers; however being able to display cultural sensitivity, maintain social relations, and speak local languages also play into a person's level of development with regards to cross cultural competence (Toprak & Genc-Kumtepe, 2014). Technological competence training on the other hand is the process of training teams on new technology and encouraging employees to embrace the connectivity which will enable a great amount of colleagues to work together to achieve results (Zakaria & Mohd Yusof, 2005).

Along with these balanced training programs, many organizations are finding it helpful to regularly review established ways of working that all team members agree to, ensuring all team rules continue to remain relevant. Investing time in staff development opportunities to showcase cross cultural differences to improve team members' understandings of each other has also been shown to help build trust and respect within groups, and when possible, a rotation of team meeting locations which can allow colleagues to show off their culture (Govindarajan & Gupta, 2001).

Working with a company striving to build strong virtual cross cultural teams will require forward thinking analysis of each individual team member. Understanding the backgrounds of each team member can assist managers in the molding of an effective and collaborative work group. The tools introduced below are recommended for use by any company looking to build an effective virtual cross cultural team through continuous team development of cultural understandings and communication skills

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### **Tool: The Argonaut assessment**

The Argonaut assessment program, which was developed in the 1990s and pioneered as an e-learning tool in 2002, is a blended learning model with a wide variety of OD practitioner tools that can be used alongside the initial web based tool. The Argonaut e-learning system allows participants to have access to a wealth of information regarding intercultural training and development. The program provides information on:

- understanding stereotypes,
- the various layers of culture,
- concepts associated with culture as well as additional reading materials by leading researchers in the area of cultural preferences,
- an assessment of the participant in relation to how (s)he relates to their home country or other countries of interest.

The Argonaut tool evaluates participants on 12 different areas which have been identified as sources of conflict when working with international groups.

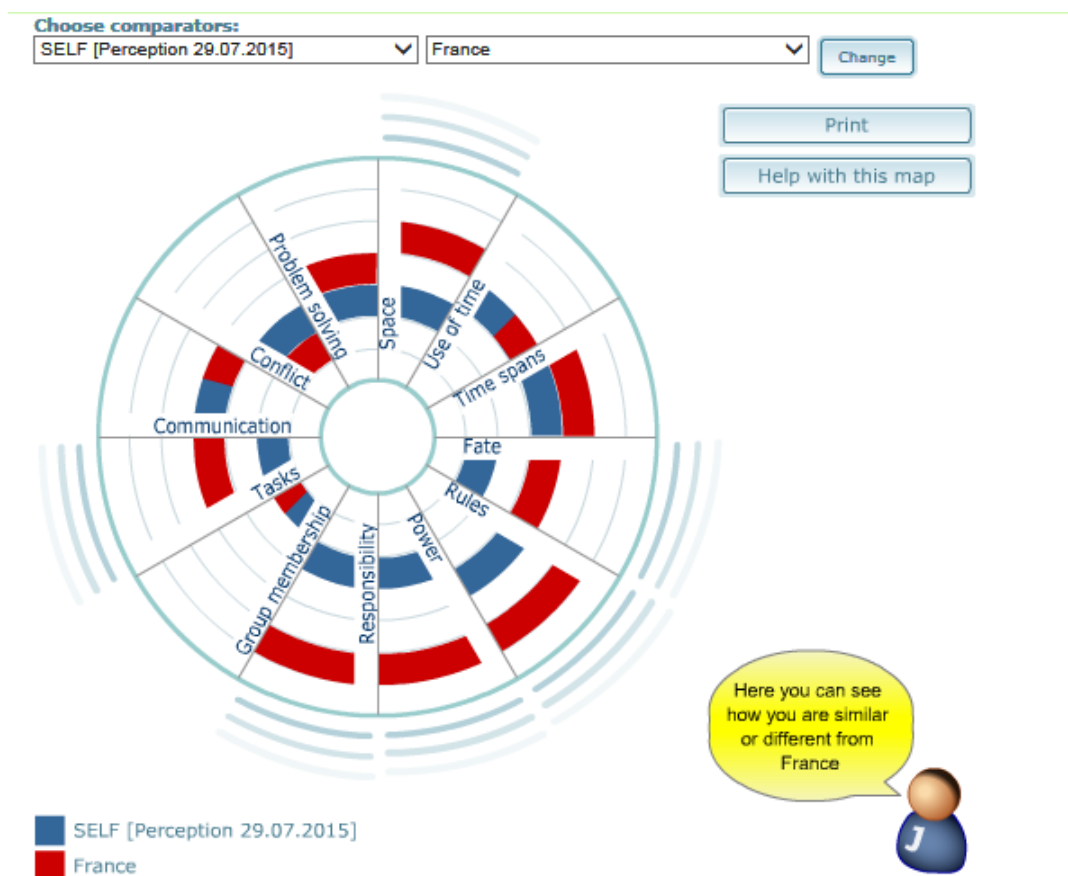
**Focus of the Tool.** The focus on the Argonaut tool is to help individuals understand unconscious cultural preferences they hold strongly to while introducing ways to interact with team members from differing cultural backgrounds. Organizational development practitioners (ODPs) may find this tool effective at the preset of a new team to showcase the various similarities and differences that exist among team members and use this as a stepping stone for collectively setting group/team expectations.

**How to use tool.** Upon initial registration, the participant is guided to the Argonaut personal self assessment which consists of multiple questions to analyze the employee's cultural norms. Once complete, the individual will receive a customized cultural profile that provides a summary of the personal characteristics of that individual as well as



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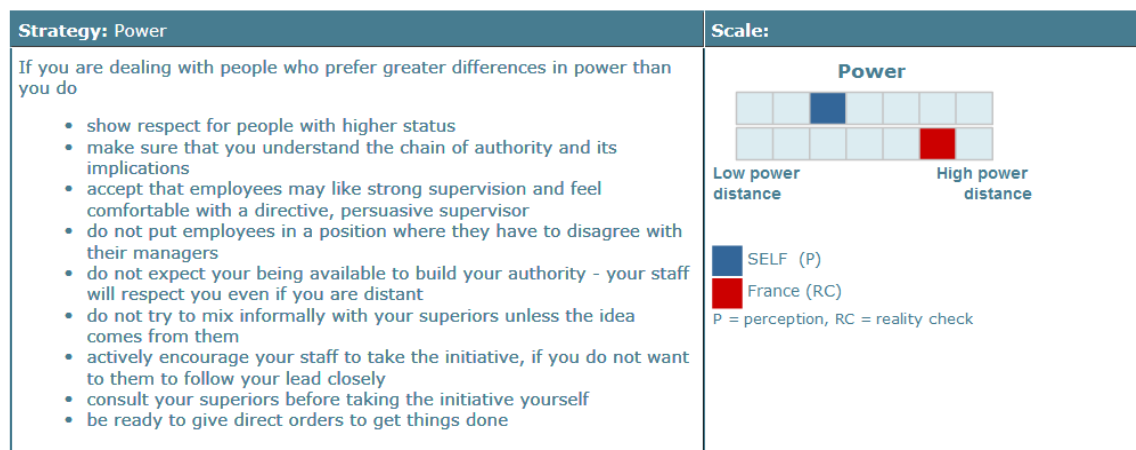
access to a drop list of countries to understand how similar or different the employee is to individuals from another country culture. As you can see in Figure 1, the color areas close together show what similarities exist between the individual and country norms. Areas with large gaps between the colors suggest there is a significant difference in how the individual and country approach respective topics. There can also be a variation seen among the participant and the home country in which the person is from based on life events and experiences. Using Argonaut can be helpful for participants learning how to better work with colleagues from the home country as well as those colleagues around the world.



*Figure 1.* Argonaut Assessment of comparative results, self to France country norms. Developed by Caroline Beery, Richard Farkas and Andrey Jichev

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By utilizing this Argonaut tool, team members are able to better understand team members from other countries by reviewing and appreciating the differences in cultural mindsets. This can also assist team members in understanding how to communicate with others from differing country cultures. The Argonaut program also provides tips for interacting with each culture to ensure relationships are not destroyed by misunderstanding country values or generally accepted business practices of work colleagues. If a participant is interested in learning how to better address areas with large gaps, they can click on the respective area and be guided to a page that provides additional information and tips for working effectively together. Figure 2 shows helpful tips for the participant in dealing with people with a greater power distance than the participant.



*Figure 2.* Argonaut tips for effectively working with people with a different power distance than the participant. Developed by Caroline Beery, Richard Farkas and Andrey Jichev

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By leveraging the research and insight available through this Argonaut tool at the onset of a new virtual cross cultural team, it allows managers to quickly and effectively address any potential differences in team member expectations by allowing team members to see for themselves the different preferences that exist with regard to approaching new projects, communication, and general ways of working. This tool should continue to act as a reference guide for employees to look back on as they continue to work with other new cultures.

### **Tool: Roadmap to authentic communication**

Another tool to OD practitioners can use in building effective virtual cross cultural teams is a tool created by Denyse Perry which focuses on turning empathy to action through authentic communication. Denyse Perry's work continues to build on Marshall Rosenberg's research into nonviolent communication. According to Rosenberg, nonviolent communication is based on historical principles of nonviolence – the natural state of compassion when no violence is present in the heart. (<http://www.cnvc.org>). When frustrations and struggles occur within a group dynamic it stems from an unmet need within the individual. Understanding how to effectively identify that need and engage in an authentic dialogue around that need is imperative in team dynamics and can be detrimental to virtual cross cultural teams if team members cannot properly communicate with each other (D. Perry, personal communication, February 24, 2015).

**Focus of the tool.** This roadmap can be used to assist team members in having authentic conversations by focusing the conversation around unmet needs within an individual. This tool is based on the notion that when individuals struggle it is a result of an unmet need. Internally this can be identified when a negative emotion is triggered in the human

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body. The best way to do this is by paying attention to negative emotions.

Uncomfortable feelings are a clear sign that important needs are not being met (D. Perry, personal communication, February 24, 2015).

Figure 3 provides an example of negative emotions that trigger within the human body when an unmet need occurs.

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<b>Annoyed</b> aggravated, dismayed, disgruntled, displeased, impatient, irritated, irked	<b>Anxious</b> tense, cranky, distressed, distraught, edgy, fidgety, frazzles, irritable, jittery, nervous, overwhelmed, restless, stressed out	<b>Disturbed</b> disquieted, agitated, alarmed, discombobulated, disconcerted, perturbed, rattled, restless, shocked, startled, surprised, troubled, turbulent, turmoil, uncomfortable, uneasy, unnerved, unsettled, upset	<b>Heartbroken</b> agony, anguished, bereaved, devastated, grief, hurt, lonely, miserable, pained, regretful, remorseful
<b>Angry</b> enraged, furious, incensed, indignant, irate livid, outraged, resentful	<b>Baffled</b> ambivalent, baffles, bewildered, confused, dazed, hesitant, lost, mystifies, perplexed, puzzled, torn, curious	<b>Embarrassed</b> ashamed, chagrined, flustered, guilty, mortified, self-conscious	<b>Sad</b> depressed, dejected, despair, despondent, disappointed, discouraged, disheartened, forlorn, gloomy, heavy hearted, hopeless, melancholy, unhappy, wretched
<b>Aversion</b> animosity, appalled, contempt, disgusted, dislike, hate, horrified, hostile, repulsed	<b>Disconnected</b> alienated, aloof, apathetic, bored, cold, detached, distant, distracted, indifferent, numb removed, uninterested, withdrawn	<b>Exhausted</b> beat, burnt out, depleted, fatigued, lethargic, listless, sleepy, tired, weary, worn out	<b>Vulnerable</b> fragile, guarded, helpless, insecure, leery, reserved, sensitive, shaky
<b>Afraid</b> apprehensive, dread, fearful, foreboding, frightened, mistrustful, panicked, petrified, scares, suspicious, terrified, wary, worried		<b>Frustrated</b> exasperated, angry/confused	<b>Yearning</b> envious, jealous, longing, nostalgic, pining, wistful

*Figure 3.* List of negative emotions that trigger in the human body. Created by Denyse Perry.

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Identifying the negative emotion is the first step in identifying a problem, however acknowledging the unmet need may take time and a higher level of self awareness. Identifying the negative emotion and corresponding unmet need can be instrumental in assisting team members communicate effectively. Figure 4 provides a list of universal human needs to thrive. Learning how to positively communicate these unmet needs is challenging and takes time to develop the appropriate skill set needed to make such a request. (D. Perry, personal communication, February 24, 2015).

<p><b>Connection</b> acceptance, acknowledgement, affection, appreciation, belonging, cooperation, communication, choice, closeness, commitment, community, companionship, compassion, consideration, consistency, continuity, empathy, inclusion, intimacy, forgiveness, to be cared for, love, mutuality (sameness), nurturing, respect/self-respect,, safety (emotional), security, stability, support, warmth, friendship, predictability, reassurance, to know and be known, to see and be seen, to understand and be understood, trust, respect, dignity, warmth, protection</p> <p><b>Honesty</b> authenticity, integrity, presence</p>	<p><b>Play</b> encouragement, expression, joy, humor, celebration, fun, happiness, mystery, originality</p> <p><b>Peace</b> autonomy, beauty, communion, ease, equality, focus, freedom, harmony, inspiration, order, rhythm, stability</p> <p><b>Physical well-being</b> air, energy, food, water, rest, movement/exercise rest, sleep, sexual expression, safety (physical), shelter, tough</p>	<p><b>Meaning</b> awareness, celebration of life, challenge, clarity, competence, completion, consciousness, contribution, creativity, discovery, efficacy, effectiveness, empowerment, ethical environment, growth, hope, identity, integrity, learning, making a difference, mourning, participation, purpose, self-expression, skill, spontaneity, stimulation, structure, to matter, understanding, validation, value, versatility, to know I'm okay</p> <p><b>Autonomy</b> choice, freedom, independence, space, spontaneity, personal responsibility</p>
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*Figure 4.* List of universal human needs to thrive. Created by Denyse Perry

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**How to use the tool.** To effectively use Perry's roadmap for authentic communication shown in Figure 5, participants engage in trust building conversations around difficult topics using a basic observation, feeling, need request (OFNR) process of stating an observation, naming a feeling from the list of negative emotions listed in figure 3, stating a need listed in figure 4, and following with a request for assistance or action.



Denyse Perry 2015

Figure 5. Authentic communication roadmap. Created by Denyse Perry



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**When to use the tool.** This tool can be extremely effective when conflict arises among team members or whenever an unmet feeling is causing significant negative emotions within a team member. Use of this tool can be of particular importance among virtual cross cultural teams where emails, texts, and misunderstandings can grow to exponential levels. Knowing how to effectively communicate with team members can resolve many unnecessary issues that develop in a healthy and positive manner so as not to destroy the larger team dynamics. It is imperative that proper training on authentic communication is taught to all team members at the commencement of a new team rather than waiting until an issue develops and authentic communication needs to occur.

Implementation of these two tools for any virtual cross cultural team can ensure companies are developing teams fit for success in the new global virtual workplace, by striving to minimize cultural misunderstandings and communication breakdowns that have been cited as the biggest challenges in managing virtual cross cultural teams. It is imperative to note though that while each of these tools provides a continued level of awareness and development among team members, the tools are only valuable if team members remember to use the assets and resources provided to them. Therefore, it is essential to continue to build upon these building blocks and encourage team members to use these assets regularly in daily work projects and create a new way of working which will only further improve the success of the overall team.

## Conclusion

As the internet continues to connect more people around the world, cross cultural virtual teams will continue to grow as businesses continue to link together high performing team members to solve various team projects. Understanding not only how to

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interact with team members from other cultures but understanding any cultural biases prior to working with others is imperative in today's global marketplace. Learning how to best communicate and motivate team members from various cultural backgrounds is now a crucial part of all multinational organizations, and one challenge that will not go away as the world continues to become more connected. Each of these articles brings a new and insightful approach to overcoming the challenges of working within a virtual and cross cultural team dynamic. The initial research completed by Greet Hofstede in the 1970s still holds true as researchers continue to test of Hofstede's pioneered work around cultural dimensions theory.

Despite the continuous developments in videoconferencing and connectivity through multiple mediums, the technology used to help flatten the world is also a source of miscommunication and misunderstandings on a national stage when cultural sensitivities are not considered. This challenge will continue to face businesses and additional research into the impact of improper use of technology among cross cultural virtual teams is likely to provide additional insight to businesses focusing on team development. Understanding the customs and traditions of an area can not only help businesses better understand local markets, but also allow colleagues to better learn and understand each other. All of the articles align on the need for continuous development of team members and managers to succeed in this new global village. By continuing to develop team dynamics within virtual cross cultural teams, businesses are better able to leverage the open systems needed in the continuously evolving marketplace. The next step would be to continue to build upon existing research and develop a toolbox of self reflections and group activities that can be used by teams both in person and virtually, to continue to bridge gaps in

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understanding between team members and further contribute to the team development tools organizations can use to develop best in class virtual cross cultural teams.

### **Reflection**

Peer feedback was used to identify areas of additional explanation and clarity needed for this paper. Key takeaways on the topics of virtual cross cultural team development include, but are not limited to: continual team development in the area of authentic communication. Proper implementation of authentic communication allow for colleagues to discuss challenging team issues in a manner conducive to all. Additionally, working among virtual cross cultural teams enables opportunities for misunderstanding and misinterpretation of meaning to occur. Regularly checking in with team members to ensure messaging is received and interpreted as intended is imperative in global markets where miscommunication can easily occur as a result of improper communication. Ongoing team member education around authentic communication and cultural differences can be instrumental in keeping the challenges associated with virtual cross cultural teams top of mind. Implementation of the Argonaut assessment and Roadmap to Authentic Communication will be valuable as I continue in my career as a member of a virtual cross cultural team.

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