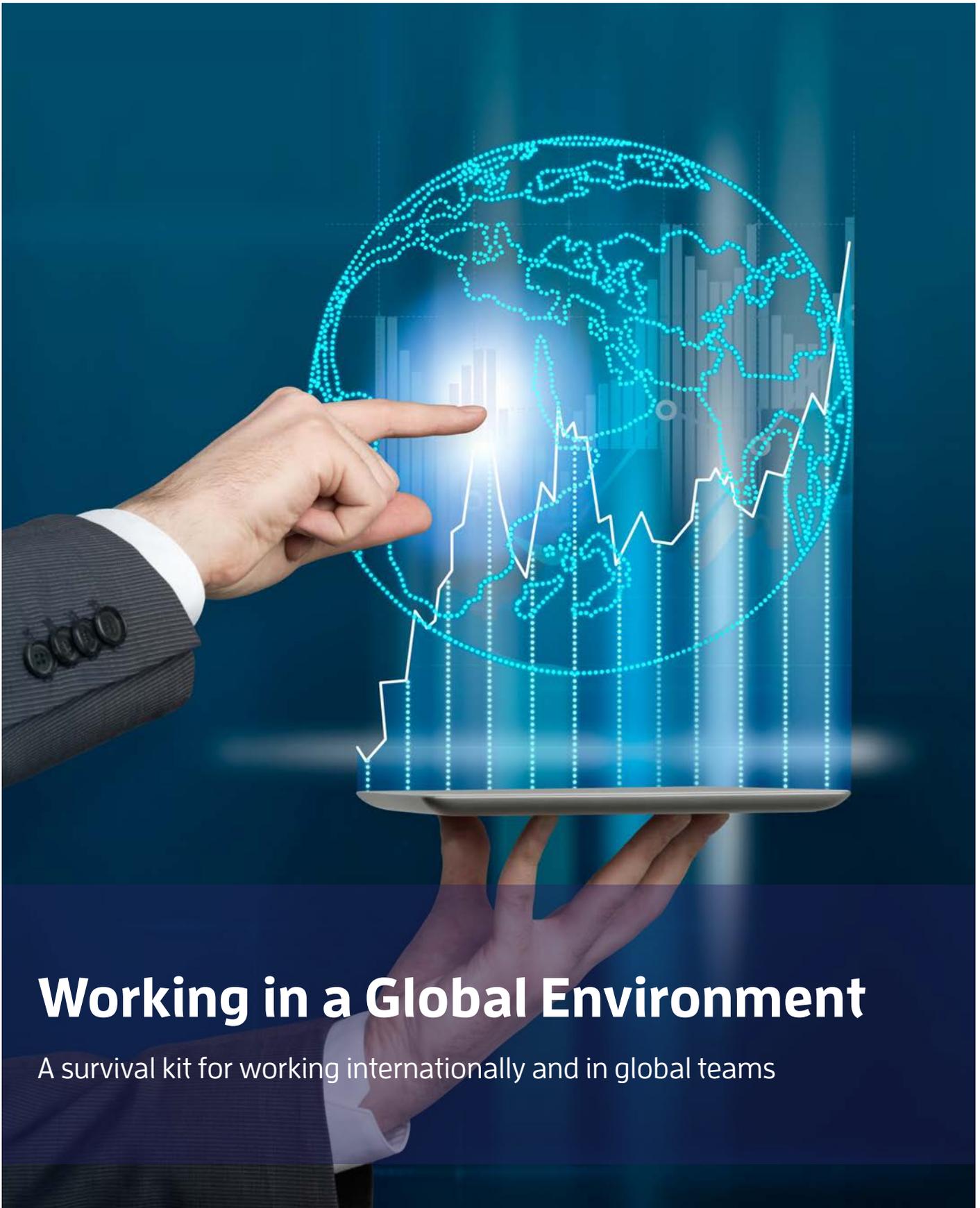




**Global Business Culture**

Delivering Cultural Connections



# Working in a Global Environment

A survival kit for working internationally and in global teams

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## The Virtual Team Leader



Although the various roles of the virtual team leader might be described as almost infinite, the key activities can be broken down as:

- Setting objectives and goals
- Defining roles and responsibilities
- Co-ordination and control
- Feedback and advice
- Managing expectations

The next few pages give a few helpful hints and tips on each of these areas.



## Setting Objectives and Goals

The starting point for this has to be with the leader himself or herself. If you are not clear about these issues yourself, how can you expect to effectively convey them to other people?

### Questions to ask yourself:

- Who sets the goals?
- Do I do it, or are the goals set elsewhere?
- Are the goals constant or will they change over time?

- How frequently do I need to review them?
- Will these goals be self-explanatory to all team members?
- If the purpose of the goals is not obvious, why?

Do you have an answer for each of these fundamental questions? If you are not clear about any of these areas, how do you expect your team members to feel?

## Defining Roles and Responsibilities

You must be clear in your own mind about each team member's role. Then you need to move on to the issue of communication. How can you ensure that your vision for the role(s) of each team member is communicated appropriately and effectively?

### Questions to ask yourself:

- Am I clear in my mind of the roles and responsibilities of each team member?
- Will this breakdown ensure that we reach our goals?
- Are all tasks and processes covered?
- Does any single team member have a disproportionate workload?

- Is there any duplication or areas left uncovered?
- Are these roles and responsibilities written down?
- How will I clearly communicate these issues to individual team members?
- How can I ensure that the whole team understands everybody else's role?

## Co-ordination and Control



The leader has to decide the best method of leading the team. Will this be through a command and control approach or more through playing the role of a coordinator and facilitator? Although the answer to this question may seem simple in your mind, various difficulties present themselves.

### Questions to ask yourself:

- What is my normal leadership style?
- Does this style work equally well with all team members?
- Which type of team member do I feel most at ease with/most ill at ease with?
- Do all cultures expect leaders to lead in the same manner?
- How can I best issue instructions to elicit the best response?
- Do I need to communicate my management style? If so, what are the best channels?



## Feedback and advice

There has to be a time and a place for both of these activities. The secret is to know when to give feedback and when to offer advice. It is also essential that the recipients know when they are being given feedback and when they are being advised.

### Issues to think about:

- Is most of my feedback negative? Do I seek just as actively to praise as to criticize?
- How will this feedback or advice appear in the eyes of the recipient?

- What method of communication is most appropriate?
- Do I use email as something to hide behind?
- Am I fair across the whole team?
- Am I open to feedback from the team? Do I listen to advice easily? Do I walk the talk?

## Managing Expectations

It is important that team expectations are met – otherwise there will be frustration, confusion and unhappiness. With a multi-cultural, geographically diverse team, it can be very difficult to even know what the expectations on you might be. Leadership styles vary enormously in different cultures and so your 'natural' style may be very bizarre to people in a different country.

### Questions to ask yourself:

- Do I know what the cultural expectations are from each of my team members?
- Does the team understand the different dynamics of a virtual team as opposed to a co-located team?
- What am I doing to ensure that I manage the expectations of the various team members?
- Do I understand team member's individual expectations with regard to their own careers?

## Working Across Cultures



Working with people from other cultures brings both massive challenges and massive rewards. You will find below some of the key issues to bear in mind when working in a culturally diverse environment.

**Above all remember to keep an open mind at all times!**

### Cultural Programming

- Your place of birth and childhood influences can have a major impact on your approach to work and business later in life.
- We are all 'programmed' to behave in a certain way and to respond to issues according to this programming.
- Very few people are ever able to shake off this early programming and it is vital that you acknowledge and recognize that you have a certain 'cultural style' which may seem alien to other nationalities.
- It is as important that you understand your own cultural approach as it is to understand the approach of others.



## National Business Cultures

Although people often object to the idea, each country seems to have developed its own slightly unique approach to certain business situations.

### Never forget that:

- When dealing with colleagues or clients from a different culture, you need to know two things – your own approach and the approach of the other culture.
- Only when you understand both of these issues will you be able to determine where the likely areas of similarity and difference are.
- Most people within a certain national business culture will conform to their own cultural norms most of the time – however there will always be people who do not. Every culture has people who deviate from the norms.
- Regional differences exist but can be very difficult to see across the cultures. In order to spot regional differences you usually need to speak the language of the country quite well.

## Cultural Spectacles

Everybody in the world has a sense of 'normality' in terms of thought processes, attitudes and approaches in the work place. What everybody needs to recognize is that their own sense of 'normality' is probably only considered normal within their own country. Everybody looking into your country from outside might see your approach as being 'abnormal'.

### Being aware of your own cultural spectacles leads you to:

- Recognize that you do not see yourself as others see you
- Accept that an approach you see as positive might be viewed negatively by people from another culture
- Champion the need for objectivity when working with members of a virtual, multi-cultural team
- Question at every stage whether the approach you are adopting to any given situation is the correct one
- Encourage all team members to accept that a good idea is a good idea regardless of where it originates.

## Key Areas of Cultural Impact



It is difficult to see any areas of international business which are not very heavily impacted on by cultural differences. These impacts may be obvious, or they may be very subtle, but they are there in just about every aspect of corporate interaction.

Although it is impossible to highlight all the areas of concern in this toolkit, some of the major issues you need to think about are listed here.

### Approach to meetings:

- There is no such thing as a globally accepted view of what constitutes a good, professionally-run meeting
- Each country's culture has slightly different views around the whole meetings scenario
- Do not assume that the way you want to run a meeting will meet with approval everywhere
- Issues to think about with regard to meetings are:
  - attitudes to use of agendas
  - punctuality
  - degree of pre-planning expected



## Leadership Style

We all tend to have a management style which has evolved during our working life and with which we feel comfortable. Bear in mind, however, that your management style is probably heavily influenced by your country of origin.

Different countries tend to develop different approaches to management and corporate structure. Some people are comfortable with the concept of hierarchy; others are not. Some people see managers as mentors who are there to encourage and coach; others expect a more instructional approach from the boss.

**When leading a multi-cultural team you need to be aware of:**

- your personal leadership style and how this may be viewed by each team member from each country
- the expectations of each team member with regard to how they expect to be managed
- the need to communicate your own approach to leadership so that your team members are not left feeling confused and unsure of how to act or what to do

## Decision-making Styles

How will decisions be arrived at within the team? Will you make the decisions and then issue instructions or will a more consensus-style be developed in which all members are encouraged to participate in the process?

Whichever style is adopted it is imperative that the process is understood by everybody from a very early stage in the life-cycle of the team.

**Virtual teams with a multi-cultural dimension operate most effectively when the team leader:**

- engages the whole team in a debate about the decision-making process at an early stage

- agrees with team members what decision-making process is most appropriate in which situation
- communicates this agreed process clearly
- is actively seen to be following the agreed procedure
- reviews the process on a regular basis

## 10 Golden Rules

Whilst there is no secret recipe for effective international co-operation, these ten points might help you to navigate successfully through the complexities of international relationship-building:

1. Avoid making instant judgements or assumptions about team members from different cultures regarding their working style
2. Try to do some research on the culture of each team member when managing a culturally diverse group
3. Try to understand how your leadership style might be viewed through the eyes of team members from different cultures – they may view your style as bizarre
4. Remember that not all problems encountered in virtual teams are the result of cultural differences – the issues could be personality-based, technical or commercial
5. Just because team members do things differently in another country does not mean that they are necessarily wrong in their approach – they might be wrong but they are not necessarily wrong
6. A good idea is a good idea regardless of where it originates – you do not have all the answers
7. Not all ideas from head office are good ideas
8. Not all ideas from head office are bad ideas
9. When communicating with team members who are speaking a second language, do not over-estimate their linguistic abilities. Just because they are good at a second language does not mean they are perfect!
10. Teams and organisations that are at ease with themselves and co-operate well across the cultures will prosper in an increasingly global economy.

You can probably think of many other 'Golden Rules' but these are a good starting point to a more open and culturally aware leadership approach.



## International Communication



Many leaders of virtual teams find that a major obstacle to successful cross-border working seems to stem from difficulties arising from communication problems.

**Communication problems do not arise solely due to the fact that team members have different native languages – although this is undoubtedly an issue.**

Other factors make communication across the many cultures within a virtual team quite difficult:

### **DIFFERENT LANGUAGE SPEAKERS IN THE TEAM**

It is not simply because we all speak different languages that communication problems can arise – it is also linked to the fact that different cultures use language differently.

**What one culture feels to be a very positive communication style can often be considered a very poor communication style in another culture.**

All too often approaches to communication which differ from the norm in your own culture can be misinterpreted as a personality defect.

Instead of people thinking, ‘that’s the way they use language in that particular country’ people associate language style with negative characteristics such as rudeness or evasiveness.

### **ENGLISH AS THE TEAM LANGUAGE**

A major difficulty in virtual teams is that non-native speakers are obviously at a serious disadvantage in all inter-team communication situations.

**No matter how good somebody is in a second language, they are never as fluent as they are in their native language.**

Very often, the common international language of meetings will be English and native speakers will make few efforts to speak in a 'user-friendly' fashion to help their non-native speaker colleagues or clients.

**Native speakers need to think very carefully about their use of language when interacting in an international context.**

Remember that English is spoken in different ways by different people – UK English often differs significantly from US English.

## DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION TOOLS

In virtual team situations, most communication takes place by email, conference call or video conferencing rather than on a face-to-face basis.

These technologies are an integral and vital part of virtual team working, but need to be carefully managed if we are to avoid the dangers inherent in non face-to-face communication.

The benefits brought by these communication technologies by far outweigh the risks, but even greater benefits can be gained by skillful exploitation of key techniques.

**The virtual team leader needs to be able to select the best communication medium for each situation. Do not simply communicate in one particular way because that is how you have always done it or because it is an easy solution.**



## International Communication Styles

An understanding of the communication style differences within your team will help you lead more effectively.

### DIPLOMACY AND DIRECTNESS

Some cultures put directness before diplomacy whereas other cultures put diplomacy before directness. In those cultures which put directness before diplomacy, the truth is viewed almost as an object. It is important that the truth be made clear, simple and without deviation.

Those cultures which put diplomacy before directness will never directly say the truth if they feel that by speaking the truth they risk having a negative emotional impact on other people.

This difference of approach can have negative impacts when both approaches meet in a business situation. Those from the 'direct' side often accuse the diplomatic cultures of evasiveness and even dishonesty while the more diplomatic cultures often find direct cultures abrupt and even rude in their approach.

#### Direct cultures include:

- Germany
- Netherlands
- Sweden
- USA
- Australia

#### Diplomatic cultures include:

- Japan
- India
- Korea
- UK
- Belgium

### LITERAL AND CODED LANGUAGE

Some cultures speak in a more or less literal way – they try to say exactly what they mean at all times and feel that to do otherwise is evasive and inefficient.

Other cultures speak in what is generally referred to as 'coded' language and try to soften what they say for fear of offending.

Literal cultures often find dealing with coded cultures problematic as they don't really understand what is being said, whereas coded cultures often find literal cultures lacking in linguistic refinement and finesse.

Each side finds the other equally difficult to deal with.

#### Literal cultures include:

- Germany
- Netherlands
- Sweden
- USA
- Australia

#### Coded cultures include:

- Japan
- India
- Korea
- UK
- Belgium

## RESERVE AND EMOTION

Calmness and reserve in all business situations is viewed as an absolute professional necessity in some cultures. People who seem unable to maintain their professional equilibrium and show their feelings can be viewed with suspicion by more reserved cultures.

People from certain other cultures however view the use of emotion in some business situations as a sign of real engagement and interest in the process. Lack of emotion is viewed by these people as a sure sign of disinterest.

This difference often leads to people misreading the intentions and emotions of their counterparts. 'Emotional' cultures view their 'reserved' counterparts as disengaged whilst the 'reserved' cultures will feel that their more 'emotional' colleagues are only acting that way because they know they are wrong! On both occasions, both sides are misinterpreting badly.

### Reserved cultures include:

- UK
- Sweden
- Netherlands
- Japan
- India

### Emotional cultures include:

- Italy
- Spain
- Greece
- USA
- Saudi Arabia
- Brazil

## SELF-PROMOTION AND SELF-DEPRECATATION

Certain cultures find it difficult to speak positively about themselves and prefer to understate their abilities and self-deprecate about themselves in general.

Other cultures, however, are much more self-promotional and would find it bizarre to say they were not very good at something when in fact they were skilled in that area. These cultures will only say they are not good at something if they genuinely have a problem in that area.

People from cultures which prefer understatement often find colleagues and clients from more self-promotional cultures to be aggressive and arrogant whereas people from the more self-promotional cultures will often take on face value the understatement of other cultures – they believe them if they say they have a weakness!

### Self-deprecating cultures include:

- Japan
- China
- Korea
- UK
- Finland

### Self-promotional cultures include:

- USA
- Australia
- France
- Brazil



### WRITTEN AND SPOKEN WORD

Some cultures place far greater emphasis on the importance of written communication between people. Only when something has been communicated in writing does that issue become a reality.

Other cultures place much greater emphasis on the value of spoken communication – things are only really believed when they have been communicated by people with whom they have a strong, trusting relationship.

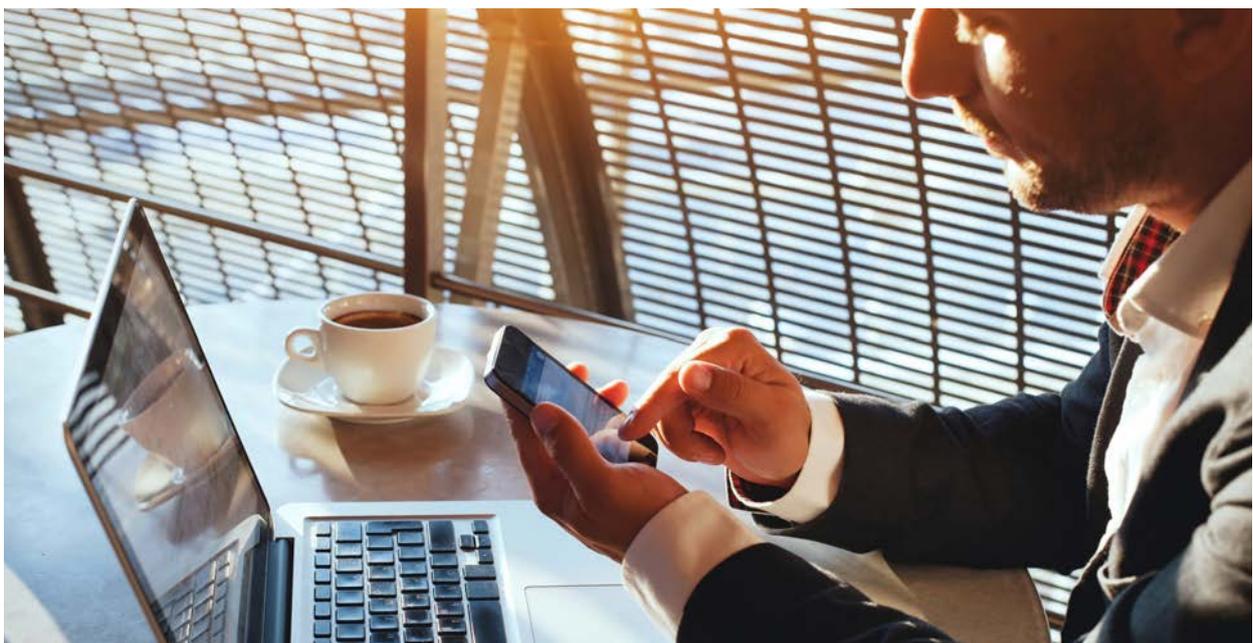
This simple fact can have a major impact on communication flow and the achievement of objectives within a virtual team. Do you communicate to each team member in exactly the same format regardless of their cultural background? Might it be a good idea to communicate more information orally to certain team members if you want them to fully 'buy-in' to what you want to achieve?

### Written-word cultures include:

- Germany
- UK
- USA
- Sweden
- Netherlands

### Spoken-word cultures include:

- Spain
- Italy
- Saudi Arabia
- India
- Brazil



## Use of English

Non-native speakers need to be given every assistance to ensure that they can fully participate in virtual team events. If the meetings are dominated by native-speakers of English, it is the team leader's fault. Don't let it happen!

**Be aware of the following at all times:**

### CONTROL YOUR SPEED

- Keep at the forefront of your mind: slow down, slow down, slow down.
- Speak at the same pace regardless of who you are talking to.
- Don't speak more slowly to non-native speakers only to speed up when conversing with other native speakers.

### VOCABULARY

- Native speakers use all kinds of vocabulary that non-native speakers simply do not know.
- When working internationally it is a good thing to use the same vocabulary over and over again. It is the message which is important, not the style of the messenger!

### SAYINGS

- These figures of speech such as 'cheesed off' (unhappy), 'sticky wicket' (difficult situation) are usually a nightmare for non-native speakers because they are often illogical.
- Colloquialisms (sayings) are very confusing when used in an international situation. There is always another way to say the same thing – chose the other way.

- Colloquialisms are a good thing to talk about in social situations as people love to learn them. In serious meetings, however, they can cause great confusion.

### HUMOUR

- Humour is usually at the edge of linguistic complexity.
- Humour is very often culturally specific. What one country finds funny, people from another culture may find irrelevant or even slightly surreal.

### ABBREVIATIONS

- Very few abbreviations are universally understood and it is best to be very careful about their usage.
- Abbreviations are usually short forms of common phrases such as a.s.a.p. (as soon as possible) or abbreviations of Latin phrases such as n.b. (nota bona).
- TLAs (three letter acronyms) – which are often used to describe products or parts of your organization – should be used very carefully. Do all team members understand them?

### SILENCE

- When people do not respond quickly to questions, non-native speakers usually answer the question themselves or simply move on and ignore the silence.
- Often, non-native speakers do not respond immediately because they need a little more time to form an answer than they would if they were speaking their own language.
- Give non-native speakers a little more time and space in which to operate.



## Team Operating Agreements



Members of international virtual teams will have very different expectations regarding just about every aspect of inter-team working. People make subconscious assumptions about even the most basic areas of team-working.

Due to the cultural differences which exist within the team, there are no universally recognized 'norms'. The virtual team leader, therefore, needs to create these group 'norms' by way of a Team Operating Agreement – or mutually agreed standards to which the group will operate together.

It could be said that the key role of a virtual team leader is to get the 'Team Operating Agreement' in place because only by ensuring efficient inter-team working can the team goals be achieved.

Unfortunately, experience (and research) shows that many virtual team leaders prefer to ignore such issues - which they consider soft and non-commercial. Leaders often prefer to concentrate on what they consider to be the harder disciplines – be they financial controls, technical excellence or whatever the leader personally feels to be of most immediate importance.

## What is a Team Operating Agreement?

Simply put, a Team Operating Agreement (TOA) is a set of rules by which all members of the team agree they will be bound. The TAO sets the framework which will guide the day-to-day interaction of all team members.

It is best if this TOA is agreed right at the beginning of the life of a team and should form one of the core elements of any kick-off meeting (but it is never too late in the life of a team to introduce a TOA.)

The TOA should be in the form of a written document which is disseminated to all team members and which can, therefore, be referred back to as a reference document at any time during the life of the team.

A TOA is not necessarily a static thing and may benefit from changes, modifications and the introduction of new ideas which will improve poorly functioning areas of team interaction. The team leader should always be alive to the possibility of improvement.

## What should be included in a TOA?

There is no definitive answer to this question as all teams and projects will be slightly different.

It is, however, possible to state a minimum requirement for a workable TOA – to which specific additions can be made to suit particular needs.

As a minimum, any TOA should include an agreed understanding on:

- The role of the team leader
- The team leader's expectation of each team member
- The role and responsibilities of each individual team member
- The goals of the team
- Review processes on team goals
- The decision-making process
- Inter-team communication
- Team language
- The relevant use of voice and email communication
- Appraisal criteria
- Escalation policies
- Teleconference etiquette
- Meeting preparation and participation

Many additional items can be added to this list on a case-by-case, team-by-team basis but this list is a good starting point and can be used as a check-list on future occasions.



A pre-requisite to ensuring buy-in to such a TOA is that all virtual team members recognize and accept the existence of culturally different approaches within the team. Everybody needs to accept that their own 'norm' is not necessarily the correct approach but merely one valid approach amongst many valid approaches. If this level of cultural awareness does not exist within the team, it is the responsibility of the team leader to develop it.

Naturally, the worst thing that can happen is when the team leader gives the impression that this TOA has to be exactly the same as his or her own 'normal' approach. Everybody in the team needs to be flexible and willing to adapt their own style – especially the team leader!



## Virtual Meetings



One of the key tasks of the virtual team leader is to ensure that their meetings are viewed as effective, clear and 'must attend' sessions.

However, many virtual team meetings can all too often be seen as unproductive, confusing and a waste of time.

The team leader needs to focus on each of the core elements of the meeting and plan each element with care and attention:

- pre-meeting planning
- use of agendas
- the role of the chairperson
- ensuring total team involvement
- agreeing action
- following-up after the meeting



## Pre-meeting Planning

The easiest way to plan effectively for any virtual meeting is to ask yourself the following five very simple questions:

### Why am I calling the meeting?

You need to be clear in your own mind why the meeting is going to take place. If you are not clear of the purpose of the meeting, then it is unlikely that anybody else will be convinced of the need for it either.

- Is a meeting the best way to achieve the goal you have set yourself?
- Might the goal be achieved through a different method?
- Put yourself in the shoes of the other attendees. Will they see a point to the meeting?
- Think about this issue well in advance of the meeting – not 30 minutes before the meeting is due to start.

### Who should be invited?

Meetings can only be truly effective when you have the necessary attendees present. Think hard about who exactly needs to be invited. Do not fail to achieve your aims because you realize during the meeting that a vital participant is missing.

- Is it obvious who needs to be invited?
- Think laterally – don't let the meeting collapse by failing to think slightly outside the core team.

- If the meeting is a decision-making meeting, ensure that all the key people are invited well in advance to ensure they do not have other diary commitments.
- Be very careful about playing 'politics' by deciding not to invite somebody you feel is a difficult character – this can often lead to problems in the future.

### When is the best time for the meeting?

The timing of a meeting is often crucial in a virtual team scenario for a number of reasons and the answer to this question is never really as simple as may appear initially.

In a virtual, multi-cultural environment, the following issues need to be considered:

- Each country has a multitude of public holidays and feast days. Make sure that the meeting is not called when some of the participants expect to be at home with their families.
- The time of day in which the meeting is held can be a source of great irritation in virtual teams which span the globe. Do not always hold the meeting at a time which is convenient for you – spread the start time of regular meetings around the day so that everybody is inconvenienced on some occasions.
- Make sure you don't call meetings at a time which coincides with a colleagues busiest time of the day/week/month.

### Where should I hold the meeting?

Although the answer to this question may seem obvious – or may indeed be completely irrelevant if there are no alternatives – it is good to think a little about the issues surrounding choice of venue:

- Are some of your teleconferencing rooms better than others?
- Do some teleconferencing rooms suffer from road noise or other minor irritations?
- Is the room big enough for the number of delegates I intend to invite?
- Will some people need to sit so far from the telephone equipment that they may struggle to be heard by remote colleagues?
- How much in advance do I need to book the meeting room to ensure that I can book the best available space?
- What can we realistically cover given the time constraints we have placed upon us?
- Which issues are of greatest priority?
- What might other participants at the meeting want to discuss?
- What did we not manage to cover in the last meeting?
- How will the delegates benefit from attending the meeting (if you can't answer these questions, why should they bother attending at all?)

### What do I want to achieve in the meeting?

This is most probably the key question that the virtual team leader needs to ask before the meeting but is, surprisingly, one which is rarely analysed in any depth.

You need to clarify in advance all of the following issues:

- What outcomes do I want from the meeting in terms of best case, fall back and worst case scenario?
- What individual items need to be discussed during the meeting?



## Use of Agendas



It cannot be stressed too much how useful agendas are in the virtual team meeting situation. Agendas are the engine of the meeting, they allow everybody to focus in advance and throughout the meeting and then serve as a useful memory aid when producing the minutes.

- Think carefully before allowing 'off agenda' items to be introduced – you have limited time available
- Use the agenda to help you summarise key issues during the meeting

**Follow the advice below and you will find that meetings run much more smoothly:**

- Write the agenda well in advance of the meeting
- Distribute the agenda to all participants well in advance and ask for comments and other items to be included
- Remind everybody of the contents of the agenda at the start of the meeting
- Stick to the points of the agenda as much as possible during the meeting

## The Role of the Chairperson

One of the key responsibilities of the virtual team leader is to ensure that virtual meetings are chaired effectively and efficiently.

If your team meetings are ineffective, it is your fault. Don't try to blame the participants – it is your fault.

**The chairperson needs to ensure that the following happens at all times, in all meetings:**

- Meetings must not be dominated by a few strong characters
- Meetings must not be dominated by native speakers of English or those non-native speakers of English who are most fluent
- Everybody must be aware of who is speaking at all times – use names constantly
- Do not allow the meeting to go off-agenda unless there is a very, very compelling reason
- Summarise often and effectively
- Ask questions to check for understanding
- Make sure effective notes are being taken – probably better for a native speaker to do this as it is easier in your own language
- Do not allow pointless arguments to dominate the meeting – break in to any defend/attack spirals which emerge
- Remember that you are the team leader, not a dictator – do not commit yourself too early to any one opinion. Encourage others to state their views
- Keep a record of delegate participation and bring in those people who do not appear to be fully engaged
- Never allow yourself to be seen to be favouring one team member over another – this could alienate the whole team
- Actively support helpful ideas that come from team members and recognize their valuable contribution



## Ensuring Total Team Involvement

As stated above, do not allow meetings to be dominated by a few stronger characters. Virtual team meetings with a number of nationalities present, have an unhappy habit of becoming dominated by good English speakers.

**Just because somebody speaks fluent English does not mean that their ideas are better or their contribution more valuable than less able English speakers.**

It is not a bad idea for the chairperson to keep an ongoing 'participation log' during virtual meetings – this gives a very clear visual representation of how participative each team member is being.

Name	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Raj	✓	✓						
Sue	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Wim	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Manisha	✓	✓						
Pierre	✓							
Astrid	✓							
Mike	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

This table shows very clearly that the meeting is being dominated by native speakers – don't let it happen.

**The chairperson needs to encourage all delegates to participate by following the following steps:**

- Always use specific names when asking for comments or contributions – open questions with no names attached lead to silences or everybody speaking at the same time
- Start by asking for contributions from the non-native speakers
- Do not allow people to interrupt the weaker language users – give them time and space to say what they need to say
- Ensure that all delegates have actively participated at an early stage of the meeting
- Positively support the contributions made by those team members who are more reticent or weaker language speakers
- Try to overtly disagree with people – this is likely to discourage future participation
- 'Translate' anything which is said in a way that could be misunderstood – say it again in a clearer manner

## Golden Rules for Teleconferencing

This is a quick summary of issues to think about when leading international virtual teleconferences:

1. Think about the timing of the call – and if possible consult about this as widely as possible.
2. If people have to be inconvenienced, make sure it is not always the same people who are inconvenienced.
3. Make sure that you appear as flexible on the timing issue as possible.
4. Take the responsibility (in advance) for ensuring that the technology you need is available and working.
5. Try to ensure the conference call takes place in a quiet location away from any background noise.
6. It is important to let people know the agenda well in advance of the call as this allows people to get together the information they need.
7. The agenda will help the chairperson to control the meeting and make sure that there are not too many 'new' ideas introduced.
8. Non-native speakers benefit from being able to think about the issues in advance – it can help them to formulate their responses in the language of the meeting.
9. The agenda can form the basis from which minutes of the meeting are produced.
10. The chairperson needs to keep an eye on the agenda and try to structure the meeting so that everybody knows what is happening.
11. It is important that everybody is encouraged and allowed to contribute.
12. The chairperson should use names as much as possible to ensure everybody knows exactly who is speaking.
13. If it becomes apparent that some people have not understood a point, the chairperson should go over that point again to help comprehension.
14. It is important to summarise and note all decisions as they are made so that there is no confusion after the call.
15. At the end of the meeting the chairperson should go over all the main points in a clear and succinct manner to avoid future disagreements.



## Agreeing Actions

The chairperson should finish the meeting with a very clear and precise summary of the key progress made in the meeting. This could take the form of a list of action points to be completed by team members, decisions taken or merely issues covered.

**A clear, precise summary is essential because:**

- It allows any disagreements or misunderstandings to be discovered before the meeting finishes
- It helps the minute-taker to structure the minutes accurately
- It helps the chairperson (and other team members) check that all agenda items have been covered
- It gives everybody a second chance to understand issues which may have been difficult to follow in a second language
- It forms a natural break which is affirmative and positive – the chairperson is able to confirm the positives which have arisen from the meeting.

## Follow-up After the Meeting

Don't assume, even if you have followed all the steps above, that everybody will have fully understood or agreed with the points arising from the meeting.

The virtual team leader has a responsibility to undertake some targeted follow-up after the meeting has finished.

**Try undertaking the following sequence:**

- Liaise quickly with the minute-taker to ensure that the minutes are produced and disseminated promptly
- Meeting minutes should be sent out while the issues are still fresh in people's minds
- Make sure that the minutes are written in concise and easy-to-understand English
- Follow-up key individuals by phone to ensure that they understand what is expected of them – this allows you to clear up any misunderstandings
- Remember that some cultures are more spoken word oriented – a phone call may be more effective than written notes.

## Developing Virtual Relationships



It is much more difficult to develop close, knowledgeable relationships with members of a virtual team than it is with people who work in the same office as you.

It is, however, really essential that the virtual team leader works doubly hard to develop these relationships across the team as without these solid relationships it is virtually impossible to build trust.

Why is it more difficult to build virtual relationships?

### LACK OF FACE-TO-FACE MEETING OPPORTUNITIES

This is the single biggest problem and the most difficult to overcome. When you don't meet people, you have fewer chances to understand the personality of each team member and adapt your approach to them accordingly.

- When those rare face-to-face sessions do take place, don't waste them
- Do not simply replicate what you do in a remote meeting at a face-to-face meeting
- Use this time to promote a better understanding of each other and the collaborative process
- Be positive in these situations – focus on successes rather than failures
- Try to ensure that the time spent together is fun and memorable
- Don't be afraid of devoting some valuable time for 'getting to know each other better' sessions



### LACK OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Research shows that the most successful virtual teams know each other very well. Team members are friendly and concerned about each other.

The role of the virtual team leader is to promote an atmosphere which encourages team members to take the time to get to know each other – this is not a ‘nice to have’ - it is an essential!

- Start this process by ensuring that you know as much about virtual team members in a remote location as you do about colleagues in the same office
- Take the time to find out about their hobbies, likes and dislikes, weekend activities etc.
- Call them when they come back from vacation to find out how it went
- Send them an email on their return from vacation
- Do not use this type of interaction as a substitute for making progress on tasks – it should happen as a matter of course and at the same time as ‘business as usual’
- Remember that many cultures place enormous emphasis on the development of relationships as a key to doing successful business

### LACK OF ENTHUSIASM AND POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Poorly functioning virtual teams tend to be marked by low levels of optimism from the start which translates as a lack of ongoing enthusiasm for team tasks and objectives.

This poor morale starts with poor leadership. The virtual team leader needs to set the tone for the team by displaying confidence, optimism and enthusiasm from day one.

- Set achievable goals that you are confident of attaining – your confidence will shine through
- Identify team misgivings at an early stage and tackle them head on
- Don’t avoid the difficult issues in the early stage – they will not go away. Rather, they will grow and become recurring problems
- Communicate all successes to the whole team. Create an atmosphere where success is recognized and rewarded
- Try to ensure that your team’s achievements are widely recognized within the greater organisation – people like to belong to winning teams

## LACK OF A CLEAR COMMUNICATION PROCESS

As the team leader, it is your responsibility to determine how information will flow within the team. It is probably best if this process is agreed upon by the whole team at an early team meeting – that way people cannot complain that they don't like the system but they will know when the leader is not doing what he/she is supposed to!

- Determine what needs to be communicated and how often
  - Agree with the whole team the best way for this communication to be disseminated
  - Don't necessarily restrict all inter-team communication to strictly business issues – there is room for social messages
  - Include individual roles and responsibilities within early inter-team communication. It is important that everybody in the team understands each others' roles
  - Communication should be fair – don't only communicate with certain team members who you feel are most effective
  - Control the use of language in all communication – make things precise and clear to all
  - Don't start off with enthusiasm and then lose interest – communicate consistently over the life of the team
- Does all communication need to go through the team leader? Are there situations where it is more effective for team members to communicate directly with each other?



## Frequently Asked Questions



Below are a few frequently asked questions regarding leading virtual teams – and some suggested answers.

### Why do people not do exactly what I've asked them to do?

This is a huge question to which there can be no single, satisfactory answer. Issues which may have an impact are:

- The instructions are given using a type of language that is difficult to understand. Have you explained what you want to happen in a clear and comprehensive manner? Always start by questioning your own actions before condemning others.
- The team member may not think that the task allocated is their responsibility. Some cultures do not feel comfortable taking on tasks which lie outside the remit of their job description. You may need to remind people of their remit or re-allocate certain tasks.
- The team member is part of several other virtual teams and is prioritizing the work of the other teams more highly. Ensure that your relationship with each team member is so strong that they will always put you at the top of any priority list.
- You may have a weak team member. Are they capable of the tasks you have asked them to do? Do they need additional training? Are they in a role to which they are not suited?
- Team members are not acting on your instructions because they know that it is the wrong thing to do – for whatever reason. Some cultures do not like to say no and do not like to deliver bad news. Probe more deeply as to why they are not doing what has been asked of them – ask if there are any obstacles which you might not be able to see from a distance.

### Why is it more difficult to build virtual relationships?

The development of trust is vitally important if a virtual team is to operate effectively but trust is notoriously difficult to develop if you don't meet people regularly.

Better relationships and real trust in each other are built when:

- The team leader is seen to take an active and genuine interest in getting to know each team member as an individual
- Each team member is seen to be treated equally and fairly – preferential treatment should never be seen to be given to one person or one group of people within the team
- The team leader does not insist on his cultural approach to matters being the 'right' approach
- Team members know each other as people with social interests rather than as merely a group of people who are only defined by the tasks allocated to them as team members
- Positive feedback is given and an enthusiastic tone is set from the outset
- Every opportunity to hold face-to-face meetings is taken and that space is allowed in these face-to-face sessions for social interaction.

### How do you overcome a problem if there is no common language in the team?

This is a hugely difficult question, the answer to which can never be finite. Find below a few suggestions for how to proceed:

- Have a clear picture in your mind of the language capabilities of each team member – especially their ability with the language which has been agreed upon as the 'team language'
- Map out team members who have languages in common. It is often useful to know if somebody is weak in the team language but strong in another language
- Do not discourage people from explaining certain points in a language which is not the 'team language'
- People can usually read a language more fluently than they can speak it – use the written word to back up (or precede) verbal messages
- The use of diagrams can often cut through language difficulties – diagrams are universal
- If there is a real problem arising from the inability of a team member to understand things, you need to question the value of that team member to the team
- If a team member is vital for technical reasons but struggles with the language, see if language classes can be organised.



### How do you undo any damage caused through poor communication?

Despite the virtual team leader's best efforts, problems will still arise and misunderstandings will always happen (after all, they do in co-located teams).

When a problem arises due to poor communication, it is important that the team leader:

- Recognises that the problem is the result of poor communication and is not a sign of incompetence
- Informs the whole team that a breakdown of communication has occurred and that steps are being taken to repair any damage – but blame should not be apportioned
- Uses the incident as a learning point for the whole team. Why did this happen? Can we take any positive steps to prevent it from happening in the future
- Informs everybody when the problem has been solved and the manner in which it was solved.

## Further Information



For further information on all aspects of international working including:

- Cultural awareness training
- Cultural awareness e-learning
- Pre-expatriation training
- Virtual team-building
- Cultural awareness consultancy
- Conference speaking

**Please contact:**

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For country-specific business culture information, please refer to Global Business Culture's unique, multi-language information website:

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This site contains invaluable country-specific information on many of the world's most important economies. Issues covered by the site include:

- Business background
- Meeting styles
- Team working
- Approach to communication
- Top 20 tips



## Global Business Culture

Global Business Culture is one of the world's leading cultural awareness consultancies and the creator of WorldBusinessCulture.com – your window into a world of cultural differences.

We work with a large number of global companies, helping them to operate more effectively across the barriers of culture, geography and language and helping equip their staff with the high levels of cultural fluency needed to work effectively in today's increasingly complex, global environment.

We provide consultancy and training services in three key areas:

- **Cultural Awareness Training:** We help our clients to understand the complex global cultural environment in which they operate and provide key information and practical advice so they are able to work more effectively across borders.
- **Virtual Team Training:** Our clients find that they have increasing numbers of employees working in global virtual teams and that this is one of the most difficult global operational challenges they face. We help clients overcome these difficulties.
- **Conference Speaking:** Global Business Culture founder Keith Warburton is an internationally recognised expert on the impact of cultural differences on cross-border working and, as such, is in great demand to speak at conferences around the world.



If you would like to find out how Global Business Culture can help your organisation work more effectively in a global environment, please contact us at:

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