

5 Strategies For Working In Cross-Cultural Virtual Teams



Riding on the back of rapidly advancing communications technologies, cross-cultural virtual teams have become, well, virtually routine for many large organizations. If only human nature could change as fast as the technology! But it can't, of course. People relate to each other based on the norms of the culture they were raised in and, consequently, much of the potential business productivity of cross-cultural virtual teams is dissipated in misinterpretations, unspoken assumptions, and sometimes even traumatic interactions all borne of different work styles.

But it doesn't have to be that way. In this post I'll briefly discuss the rise of cross-cultural virtual teams and then outline five approaches human resources managers and team leaders can use to get the most out of them.

The Rise of Cross-Cultural Virtual Teams – and Their Challenges

In March, we conducted our biennial global virtual team survey, drawing on 1,620 executives in major organizations from 90 countries around the world. No less than 88% of respondents agreed virtual teams are critical to daily productivity. In fact, in the eight years we've conducted the survey, participation in virtual teams has risen from 64% to 89% of respondents. With global business growing, and new technology making it possible for professionals to collaborate from wherever they are all over the world, I bet that percentage will grow very close to 100 in the next eight years.

But even today, working in cross-cultural virtual teams can be painful. Virtual teams constantly face intercultural challenges because they bring together a variety of sometimes very different work styles, which present obstacles to productivity and innovation. And, despite investing in technologies that make cross-cultural virtual teams easier than ever before, most organizations still underinvest in the intercultural skills necessary to get the most out of that technology. Tech is developing, but humans need developing, too!

Language and time-zone differences are the most obvious hurdles to working on a multicultural virtual team. But some of the most common frustrations voiced by our survey respondents are things like “lack of participation,” “lack of engagement,” “low-context communication,” and “lack of ownership” issues – all of which are open to extreme interpretation based on your personal cultural context.

It can be as simple – and as complicated – as different cultures having different understandings of the term “collaboration.” The meaning of the word may be obvious to each of us – yet mean different things to each of us. When you dig a little deeper, it becomes clear that different cultures collaborate in different ways. Despite their different work styles, virtual team members *want* to participate – but sometimes, they just don’t know how. Some cultures may tend to be up front and dominate discussions, while others are more passive and feel uncomfortable speaking up outside a one-on-one conversation. Or, they may have different methods of reaching agreements and solving problems, or different views of deadlines and hierarchy.

In spite of these differences, professionals recognize the potential of global virtual teams: 72% of respondents believe diversity has a positive effect on their team’s performance. But how do they ensure they’re making the most of their cross-cultural virtual teams.

1. Provide Cross-Cultural Training

No one is born with the skill to understand people from foreign cultures; it must be learned. For cross-cultural virtual teams to achieve their potential, workers must demonstrate mission-critical intercultural communication skills. Yet, less than a quarter of professionals report receiving formal training or even virtual team guidelines! The problem is, no training leads to no competence. And not only for team members, but team leaders, too: 76% of virtual team leaders see themselves as moderately effective or less.

Fortunately, there’s an easy fix: cross-cultural training. People can learn how to resist the trap we all fall into when we evaluate situations only from our own perspective. By seeing business from the perspective of others, professionals are able to develop strategies to flex their work style and develop deeper intercultural insights – and stronger cross-cultural relationships.

2. Appoint a Clearly Designated Leader or Manager

An effective leader or manager must be able to clearly articulate the team’s goals, scope, decision-making processes, and more. They must be available to engage with team members – and not only through large-scale virtual meetings. I always recommend cross-cultural virtual team leaders advertise “virtual office hours,” so team members can “drop in” without a scheduled appointment. Casual chats help foster close relationships that give leaders a better grasp of the different work styles present in their virtual teams.

Meetings are just as important. To get the most out of meetings, leaders should prepare and distribute an agenda in advance. Assign someone from the team to take brief minutes and share them after the meeting. Most of all, manage group participation to help give indirect communicators a defined role. Professionals from many cultures are often less comfortable openly expressing disagreement or sharing bad news.

3. Create a Team Charter

A high-performing team needs solid guidelines. Create a team charter that serves to clarify performance expectations. Be sure to provide a literal, explicit framework for success to

ensure your whole virtual team is engaged and on the same page regardless of where they are in the world. Be sure to focus not only on the “what’s” but the “how’s.” In the same vein, always promote clear, open, and consistent communication. Honesty and openness can help foster some of the traits that prevent unnecessary challenges and conflict: respect, familiarity, comfort, and trust. Similarly, if the whole team is comfortable, they will be more likely to overcome the unavoidable challenges and conflicts associated with diverse work styles.

4. Promote an Open Environment

By creating an open environment that leaves rank and egos at the door, everyone can have an equal voice. It's important for all opinions and questions to be valid – no question is “stupid.” Assumptions lead to misunderstandings, openly sharing information is key. The structure of global virtual teams makes it easy to hide behind a screen, but an effective leader pays attention to those who are quiet, recognizing their work styles and soliciting opinions during calls and meetings. Or, instead of putting them on the spot, have a private conversation. This allows a leader to simultaneously gain insight and remind their team members that their opinions are an important part of maintaining a balanced and effective group.

5. Provide an Internal Communication Site

A well-defined virtual space for teamwork – a shared collaboration platform, for example – can help ensure all team members are always in the loop. Interpersonal relationships are more likely to flourish if you include visual and written profiles of all team members, their roles, responsibilities, and contact info. A shared collaboration page should be a carefully managed asset. By including project details along with the ability to instantly share data and insights across borders and time zones, cross-cultural virtual teams increase their potential contribution to the business.

In my experience, the best – and worst – cross-cultural virtual teams are the ones that are most diverse. Again and again, I've seen the trick that turns potential disadvantages into major business productivity advantages and increased innovation; what flips the switch from worst to best is a [global mindset](#). When a global virtual team embraces its diversity of perspective, wisdom, and talent – a diversity that is not typically present in a domestic, monocultural team – they have the potential to become the best of the best.

But the strategies described above demand education and training – only a handful of us are born with them, or spend their formative years growing up in more than one country. So, remember, no matter how well our technology develops, *people need developing, too!*

Learn more, download our [Virtual Teams Tips List](#).