

**THERESA SIGILLITO HOLLEMA**

Foreword by Fons Trompenaars,  
author of *Riding the Waves of Culture*



**VIRTUAL  
TEAMS  
ACROSS  
CULTURES**

**Create Successful Teams  
Around the World**

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# Team Configuration

Let's do a quick 'Taco Sauce Test' (Figure 1.2). Think of one of your virtual teams that you either lead or are a member.

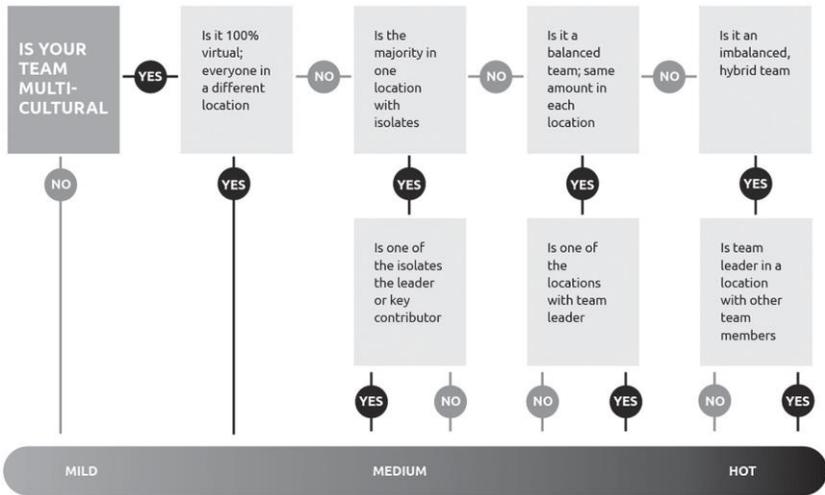


Figure 1.2 Taco Sauce Test for Team Configuration

The intensity meter indicates the challenge to collaboration simply due to configuration, the geographic location of team members. All virtual

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teams are not created equal, and team leaders need to manage and leverage the challenges and opportunities that configuration brings.

There are as many unique team configurations as there are stars in the sky. For instance, teams may be formed based on the location of their global customers. If the customer has three sites to which the company delivers, then the virtual team may consist of customer support people at the local offices of the three locations, with an additional person from the center of excellence at the corporate office.

Below are configuration types that apply to virtual teams in the same order as the Taco Sauce Test.

**100% Remote Team:** Everyone is in a different geographic location and all communication is dependent on available technologies, be it telephone, video, chat, etc. Generally, everyone has the same situation.

**Hybrid Team:** Hybrid teams appear when at least one location has more than one person. For instance, a configuration of 6-1, 3-3-2, or 4-2-1-1. Hybrid configurations are the most challenging, which seems paradoxical because having multiple team members in one location would seem like a benefit. The hybrid configuration of 3-3-2, for example, would mean that each team member has a local colleague with whom to converse in the local language, to socialize with over lunch and to spontaneously share information. Yet these innocent configurations can cause problems for cross-location collaboration.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge for hybrid teams is the establishment of subgroups that form at each location. These subgroups are often strengthened when local colleagues speak with each other and reinforce the 'us vs them' mentality. The section *Between the Locations* explains in detail why hybrid teams are unique and how teams can build the bridges between locations.

Following are various types of hybrid teams.

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**Isolates:** The core of the team is in one location and one or more persons are each in their own locations. Anyone who has ever been an isolate knows how hard it is to get the attention of the core, or to be included in decisions, especially those made by the core during lunch or at the coffee machine. There are, however, two instances when this configuration benefits the team, and this is when the isolate is either a team leader or someone critical to the success of the team. The need to involve these key people propels the team to develop an inclusive process for communication and documentation. Also, these critical isolates can be a counterweight to any groupthink that may be forming.

### The Isolate Team Leader

*Sometimes what may seem like a disadvantage of a team configuration can turn into an advantage. Over the years, I have followed the career of Tony, Head of E-Commerce at a major Nordic bank, a company that introduced virtual work years ago and now consider it part of their normal way of working. Tony, who is located in Denmark, was either a member or a leader of a hybrid virtual team until he was promoted to lead a team where everyone except Tony was located in Poland. Tony reflected on his experience as an isolate leader.*

*“For me, the challenge was how can I be close to the team even though I am not sitting there together with them. In the beginning, I had some concerns about this setup. I was afraid that I would be left out. I noticed that the team does not always include me in everything. They solve a lot of issues themselves. If the issues are brought to me, it is because they are facing some challenges they want to discuss, or they have made a decision amongst themselves and they would like to tell me.”*

*Tony continued his description of the team dynamic, including how well this type of configuration can function: “If they can solve*

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*the operational issues, and they discuss it between themselves, they typically don't inform me. And I am fine with that because it means that they are taking ownership and responsibility. They also told me that they like this trust from my side, to solve issues by themselves first. In the beginning I was wondering if I am losing something by not being involved, but now I do not have that feeling. Now when they come up with a question, they want to discuss it with me so that I can give them some direction. Based on my knowledge and experience, I can guide them or challenge their thinking. They have told me that they like that and appreciate it. I don't feel like I am left out." Tony's story shows how a team configuration has advantages when compared to co-location, specifically the development and empowerment of the team members in the absence of the leader's physical presence. His supportive leadership style built the trust and connections for the team to thrive.*

**Balanced Team:** This configuration contains an equal number of people in multiple locations. It gives the impression of a power balance until we consider the benefits of certain locations, such as who is in the same location as the team leader, who is located at the headquarters and who is located near the key customer or other stakeholder.

**Imbalanced Team:** This configuration has a majority of team members in one location and minority groupings in all the other places. The majority group seem to dominate the decisions and have overpowering influence. The minority groups tend to feel an unequal status. They often become defensive and perhaps withdraw from the group or turn to other minority group members to try to gain some leverage. At a minimum, the imbalanced teams tend to share less information, are less cooperative and are more prone to conflict.

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The majority group members often consider the minority team members as obstacles to progress and often ignore their situation-specific requirements, such as scheduling meetings at inconvenient hours or forgetting to include them in the decision-making process.

Team members on majority/minority configurations can have widely different experiences in the team. The majority group may believe that the team is functioning effectively, that the project is progressing well and that the right decisions are being made within the team. The minority team members, on the other hand, frequently feel ignored and inconvenienced, and issues that they consider to be highly relevant are not part of the group discussion. In general, majority/minority configurations result in more conflict than the balanced or 100% remote configurations.

In this section, I have explained why the Taco Sauce Test has increasing intensity depending on the type of configuration. However, these challenges are surmountable. Once the team analyze their configuration and understand the implications, they can actively strengthen the connections between the locations. There are many high performing virtual teams who ensure everyone feels included, create the closeness between remote team members and share information for creative ideas.

### *Case Study*

*Imagine a virtual team who are responsible for delivering a solution to a European client. The team consists of two account managers in France, three developers in India and four account managers in Spain. Manuel, the team leader, is also in Spain. Everyone is excited about the new customer and wants the project to succeed; however, the team does not function well together. Late replies on email are misinterpreted as a lack of commitment, and regular online meetings are dull as the agenda is filled with task updates and little discussion.*

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*Any debates are dominated by the Spanish majority, as they seem to have a united front against the others.*

*The French have the perception that the decisions are predetermined and that their voices are not heard. Customer complaints and tight deadlines create tension in the team, revealing the country loyalties over team loyalty. The team members use cultural stereotypes to explain the behavior of colleagues in the other locations.*

*Manuel finds himself at the center of the disgruntled Spanish team, who easily walk down the hall to his office to complain about the failing project. He needs to be sympathetic to them, but he knows that he also needs the support of the team who are working in other locations in order to successfully deliver to the client. Manuel realizes that the team do not share information, do not listen to the ideas of their remote colleagues and do not work together toward shared goals.*

This team has many issues, but the starting point for the diagnosis is the configuration. By looking at the team locations, we can uncover some of the sources of tension.

**1. Hybrid Configuration:** The team has a 5-3-2 configuration and the sub- groupings have formed based on location and culture. The team members across the locations do not know each other well, and instead of viewing their colleagues as unique individuals, categorize them into cultural sub- groups. Also, they favor their local colleagues instead of supporting all team members. (See Chapter Three, Between the Locations.)

**2. Majority/Minority Subgroupings:** The majority Spaniards dominate with their opinions, and the French and Indian colleagues feel marginalized. Manuel is not facilitating discussions that include everyone's point of view and is yielding to the majority.

**3. Team Leader Location:** The local Spaniards have a disproportionate influence on the team leader which, the Indian and French team members notice and resent. Any perceived favoritism by the team leader is used as further ammunition for justifying low levels of collaboration.

From this simple and very common example, we immediately see the different layers of issues that negatively affect the team dynamic and therefore the outcome of the project. But herein lies the challenge: Most virtual teams have a configuration based on a strategic or practical need. So how can virtual teams build bridges across locations to create a highly functional and successful team that optimizes the use of global talent without succumbing to the potential pitfalls of global virtual teamwork?

### *Configuration is the Context*

This question is answered throughout this book. This chapter reveals the context of virtual teams so that the other parts of the CALDO model and the solutions make sense. These solutions would include:

- Creating a shared team identity that supersedes local identities and inspires the team. This shared team identity counteracts the energy that separates team members with a spirit that connects them together.
- Recognizing, understanding and leveraging the cultural dynamics within the team so that everyone feels included and differences become a team advantage.
- Building relationships across locations so that the unique characteristics of each person override the cultural stereotypes.
- Organizing work for cross-location collaboration so the team members build trust and learn about each other's knowledge and competences.

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- Engaging team members in the minority locations with procedures and activities that are inclusive and build bridges.

### **A Clever Solution**

*Diego is an IT Director of a global manufacturer with more than 25,000 people in locations all over the world. He has lived and worked in many countries and learned early in his career how cultural sub- groupings can impact teams. When the company began a reorga- nization that accompanied a strategic shift from local to global, he and his colleagues created a new structure for the IT department. As Diego explained, "From the beginning we said that every team has to be 100% virtual. We saw that when there were many team members at one location and fewer at others, then the minorities suffered. The collaboration technology is improving, and if everyone is remote, then they are all in the same situation and have a better chance for teamwork." Even within a multinational organization with offices around the world, the department recognized the impact of configuration and created a 100% virtual organization, and the structure was a success.*

*It seems almost counterintuitive to deliberately construct 100% global virtual teams, and many people in Diego's department responded with disbelief when the policy was first announced. Syl- vie in Singapore reflected on the team formation, "At first it was strange to work with someone I did not know. All I had was an email address. Most of us were surprised, since we had colleagues in the same building. But now many of us prefer it. We know each other well, and have built a remote team spirit. My remote colleagues think about issues differently, which makes the work interesting."*

*This example shows how leaders analyze the configuration of the*

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*virtual team, the context in the CALDO model, and can make changes that help collaboration. In this case, they specified the configuration. In other cases, team leaders accept the configuration and invest to create a well-connected, collaborative virtual team.*

**Co-located Blindness<sup>2</sup>** Team members generally have a preference for the opinions and actions of their co-located colleagues, especially when virtual team members do not know each other well. A team member may hesitate to contact his remote colleague for a few reasons. For instance, he does not want to risk cultural miscommunication, he does not know how his colleague will react to the request for help and he does not know if his colleague is willing to apply her knowledge to his situation. On the other side, the remote colleague is glad not to be asked because she does not know how her expertise will be used by her remote colleague. When colleagues know each other, trust each other and have a shared goal that unites them together, these issues disappear.

### Key Points

- The CALDO model is a holistic approach to a virtual team and considers how different elements of a team ultimately impact performance.
- The team configuration, meaning the location of the team members, is part of *context* of the CALDO Model because it can impact the quality of the teamwork across the locations.
- The hybrid virtual team, which is often the most common configuration in multinational organizations, is one of the most challenging configurations because of the formation of local subgroups.
- Team leaders and members can actively create a high performing

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team in spite of the challenges of the configuration. For instance, by building the relationships and organizing shared tasks across the locations.

- Teams with isolate team members can benefit if the team member is a critical contributor or the team leader.

### Notes:

1. O'Leary M. B. and Mortensen M. (2009) "Go (Con)figure: Subgroups, Imbalance, and Isolates in Geographically Dispersed Teams." *Organization Science* 21.1, pp. 115-131.
2. Bos N., Olson J., Nan N., Shami N.S., Hoch S. and Johnston E. (2006) "Collocation Blindness in Partially Distributed Groups: Is There a Downside to Being Collocated?" CHI 2006 Proceedings, *Computer-Mediated Communication*.