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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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“Theresa has done an excellent job of reviewing the working of remote teams from the lens of *culture*... a much needed perspective. The book has a nice combination of academic research and the stories of remote teams...making it an easy read. ”

Amit Mittal, Vice President, Talent and
Organizational Development, Tetra Pak
International SA

“Building global virtual teams across cultures that truly maximize the value of their diversity has never been more important for organizations. Theresa reveals the ‘soft factors’ that drive hard outcomes. Her blend of rigorous research and hands-on experience delivers invaluable insights, case-based examples and engaging tools - Team Taco Test anyone? - for leaders, HR experts and anyone committed to improving outcomes for business and their people.”

Diane Moody, Vice President, Organizational Development
& Culture, Royal DSM

“Engaging and insightful. The conceptual argument is powerful and most of the authors’ suggestions are practical and common sense. A recommendation for global leaders to facilitate cultural bridges to enable a diverse team to thrive.”

Marlene de Koning, Director, Solutions Design EMEA-
Workplace Intelligence, Microsoft and President,
Professional Women’s Network-Amsterdam

“This book is perfect for any virtual leader, and I know many leaders and teams in India who would benefit. Globalization is here to stay, and we all must develop to leverage the capabilities we have in different locations. Theresa has put a microscope to the virtual experience and this well-researched book is full of compelling ideas and practical solutions. The three ways culture impacts virtual teams is insightful and the four Leadership Levers are relevant for all leaders, but she has given the twist for virtual context. A must-read for anyone working virtually!”

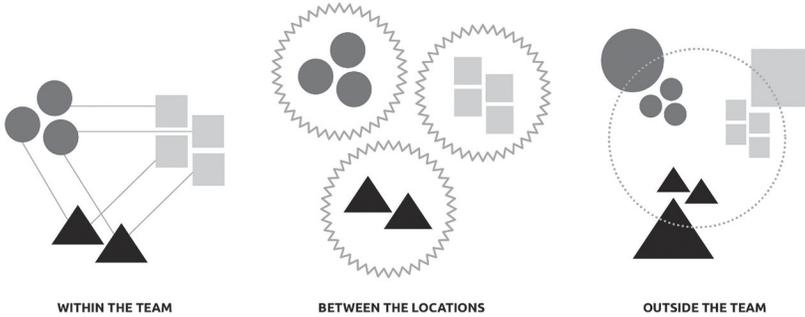
Hari T.N., Co-author, *Saying No to Jugaad – The Making of Bigbasket*

“We’ve morphed into a virtual world now, in our work and our lives, with a myriad of new opportunities and challenges. Here Theresa has unpacked both, in a depth and detail extremely useful to any of us in cross-cultural and virtual arenas. This is a pioneering piece of work in how to navigate and use best practices to optimize our engagements in an expansive and novel horizon.”

David Allen, Author, *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*

“I have been interested in the study of multicultural teams since my career began in HR almost 30 years ago. With the recent global pandemic, the need to do this successfully and virtually is even more critical than before. Theresa’s consulting experience and research help uncover diagnosis, cultural understanding and competence, and what levers to pull to help ensure you not only maintain, but enhance your company’s culture, collaboration and productivity.”

Dan Domenech, Chief Human Resources Officer,
Hewlett Packard Enterprise Financial Services



I. Within the Team

This book is ‘standing on the shoulders of giants,’ so to speak. It is built on the extensive and groundbreaking work of researchers, practitioners and writers of the past who have made contributions to the fields of anthropology, culture and business. Cultural diversity within the organizational context is a relatively new field in business study. Pioneers



such as Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Edward T. Hall and, more recently, Erin Meyer have researched and written to advance the understanding of the international and multicultural workplace.

I am building on their work by asking, “What happens when we work virtually?” The research shows that team members bring their cultural norms and assumptions to the virtual space as well, creating a multicultural environment.

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This may seem counterintuitive, since the team member sits in her own country, eating her local foods and communicating with her local colleagues in her own language and style. But as soon as she attends an online meeting, participates in a chat or calls a remote colleague, she encounters cultural diversity, without ever leaving her country.

Culture impacts a virtual team in three ways, the first is between the team members. This section contains stories that you may recognize in your own experience. A message throughout this book is that successful virtual team members develop cultural competence. The first step is to recognize cultural diversity, even in the virtual team.

How Often to Follow Up?

I met Bill in one of my courses when he was the Director of Manufacturing for the Americas region of a global packaging company located in Chicago. The “Americas” meant North and South America in this company, and his team was located throughout the region. Even though Bill was a very experienced professional, he had an ‘aha’ moment when his colleague Gabriela from Mexico explained the culture of her country. Gabriela was answering the question as to whether the team leader needs to follow up with each person individually after the team finishes a meeting and agrees on the tasks. “Yes, absolutely,” Gabriela began. “When a leader follows up with an employee a few things happen. First, you are showing that the work is important and a priority for the person. After all, they have many priorities, and especially when you are remote, you need to emphasize the task for the employee. Second, the contact itself is a chance to build the connection between each other, and to build the relationship. When you take an interest in the employee, you are showing that you care for him, and that helps with their motivation. The follow-up call or video meeting can have a powerful impact and is an important task for the team leader.”

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I saw the surprise on Bill's face, particularly when someone from Brazil contributed, "That is true for us as well." In the US, managers would not follow up after tasks were assigned and agreed during a meeting because that would be a sign of lack of trust. If a team member agrees to a task at a meeting, then everyone should assume he will do it. As Bill explained, "When we have our virtual team meetings, I ensure that the objectives and tasks are clear and everyone has agreed. I also emphasize that they can contact me if they have a problem. One of my team members in Mexico City has not been performing, and he doesn't reach out to me with problems. But I have not contacted and followed up with him, as I didn't want him to think that I don't trust him. I had not realized he was waiting for me!"

One person's annoying phone call is another person's opportunity to connect. For some cultures, the relationship is the starting point of working together. Through knowing each other, colleagues can build trust, understand each other's unique personal needs and play to each other's strengths. Other cultures, on the other hand, rely on the work itself as the basis for building connection. These colleagues commit to a task and try to complete it as a means of showing they are trustworthy.

The Environmental Impact

Another cultural consideration is how confident people are that the assumptions in a plan will be the reality when doing the work. In some cultures, there is an inherent belief that the environment is stable enough and that they have the agency to carry out the planned work. Other cultures, on the other hand, view the environment as continuously changing, and therefore, plans need to be regularly checked for the reality in which they operate.

Bill, and many other Americans, intrinsically believe that the conditions for the plan are stable, whereas the Mexican colleagues believe the

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environment can impact their plans in unpredictable ways. In Mexico, when the team leader calls the employee, they can update each other with the latest information and check that the plan is still possible.

After the course, Bill pledged to call his team members in South America more often. This is a start, and the Mexican colleagues also have an opportunity to develop new behaviors. Through building the relationships, Bill and the team can create a team environment in which the team members feel comfortable to reach out to Bill when they have a problem.

Up and Down the Hierarchy

Sven described how teams work together in Sweden. Everyone contributes their point of view, and through discussion and consensus they make a decision together. Sven and his Swedish colleagues admitted that the process is time-consuming, but they feel this is the best way to operate as a virtual team as well.

“Well, then don’t include an Italian,” countered Giandomenico, “because you will put them in a very awkward situation and cause them a lot of stress. They would feel pressure from you to act as if everyone is equal, but knowing full well that they need to consult with and include their manager in the office. You would put them in a bind.”

Organizational hierarchy is a topic that is covered in most existing cultural models such as those created by Erin Meyer (Egalitarian-Hierarchical),⁵ Fons Trompenaars (Achievement-Ascription)⁶ and Geert Hofstede (Power Distance).⁷ In some cultures, leaders have a prominent role in directing and guiding the organization, while in other organizations they have a more hands-off role of coaching and strategy.

Jia-Xin in Singapore was responsible for a regional team and was surprised by how the hierarchy played out in the project dynamic. The team consisted of people from three countries: two from Australia, three from India and two from Singapore. Jai-Xin is highly educated and grew up in Singapore, a country rich in diversity of cultures living together. Singapore

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plays an important role in being the bridge between the East and West, and people who live in the cosmopolitan city-state are continuously bumping into expats, visitors and people from other cultures. Still, Jia-Xin was shocked.

“I was promoted as the head of the IT development team and was excited about the position,” she said enthusiastically. One of her first projects was to integrate the IT department of a new acquisition in Australia with the IT Shared Services Center in India. The Australian company had IT applications, which were new to the group, so they wanted to bring them into the standard process.

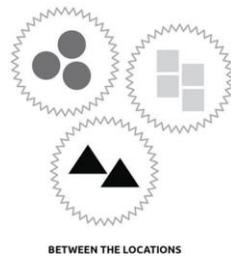
“What was surprising to me,” Jia-Xin explained, “was how uninterested the management of Australia was in our project. I would call them to confirm some of the decisions and their answers were something like, ‘Why are you bothering me? Talk to the Australians on the team, they can handle these issues.’ In my view, keeping the team leader informed is required and it is a way to ensure that our decisions are aligned with what they want. I thought I was doing the right thing, speaking from manager to manager, and although they were polite, they were not interested. I felt this was risky for the project, that the decisions of the team members might not be checked and aligned with the location directors.”

Brian, in Australia, whom the manager Jia-Xin contacted, had a different perspective. “I am definitely interested in the project and want it to succeed. It is part of our integration strategy and I discussed it with Dirk and Robert when they first started. Although I touch base with them to talk high level, I do not need to go into the details of every decision. They can handle that. Actually, every time Jia-Xin calls me to discuss the project, the two guys feel undermined. It really doesn’t help their confidence, especially with the uncertainty that comes with acquisitions. They want to make a good impression,” Brian said, demonstrating sympathy with his Australian colleagues.

Whatever the leader's style, some people on the team will prefer it and some others will expect something completely different. Through conversations and practice, the team will develop norms. But since many global teams are part of a matrix organization, team members may feel the pressure between the team and their other managers, as Giandomenico mentioned earlier. An effective and caring global team leader will recognize the tension and develop solutions that work for the team and other key stakeholders.

II. Between the Locations

As mentioned in the section titled Team Configuration, hybrid virtual teams are the most challenging configuration because of the potential formation of subgroups by location, and often by culture. This is the second way that cultural diversity impacts multicultural virtual teams. I titled this section *between the locations* because cultural stereotypes



become one of the expressions of the subgroup formation.

Although they are challenging, hybrid virtual teams have the potential to achieve results beyond a co-located team. Team members can be located where the 'action' is, be that a strategic client, an integrated supplier or other key stakeholder. Having more than one person in that location can provide the critical mass to leverage the relationship or to keep abreast of new developments.

Another reason for hybrid teams may be the organizational structure. The talented people on the virtual team are located where the company assets are, for instance, in the factory, R&D labs or center of excellence.

Finally, by coincidence, more than one person on the team live and

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work in the same location. They are important for the team and are all necessary for the team's success.

Once the team leader and members understand why hybrid teams are challenging, they can take the actions to counter the subgroup tendency and realize the benefits of the hybrid virtual team.

When Distance Becomes Abstract

Think of a day in your agenda three months from now. Perhaps you have a few things blocked in your calendar, but it is fairly vague. You don't have all of the details on how the day will come together, with whom you will interact, how you will move through the day or deal with the weather. Most likely you do not feel an emotional connection with that day.

Now think of your agenda for tomorrow. You most likely know the details, how you will move through the day, whom you will see, how you will prepare, what you will wear, where you will be and when. You may even have an emotional reaction, such as dread a certain meeting, excited to see a former colleague or happy that the weather will be nice.

As humans, we view events that are nearby in detail and those that are far away as more abstract. We do this with people as well.

When we work with co-located and distant colleagues, we often experience this phenomenon, explained by Construal Level Theory.⁸ We can give detailed descriptions of our colleagues nearby such as 'Sue was interactive in the last meeting,' 'Johan prefers to speak in the morning' and 'Saskia contributed great ideas yesterday.' But we usually use abstract descriptions for our remote colleagues, such as 'They are Russian.' We do not know the individuals well enough to distinguish them from each other. We tend to use more abstract, less nuanced words to describe them.

Professors Wilson, Crisp and Mortenson of William & Mary, Abilene Christian University and INSEAD, respectively, applied Construal Level

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Theory to virtual teams as a means to understand the formation of subgroups.⁹ They explained that physical distance can lead to psychological distance, which is how one feels about something in terms of close or far in relation to themselves. The psychological distance then leads to an abstract level of thinking about the person or object.

This can have a significant impact on how teams work together because it can be the basis for an 'us vs them' mentality and corresponding behaviors.

The Role of Culture in Psychological Distance

According to the professors, cultural differences can also contribute to a feeling of psychological distance. When people hear a language that is unusual and observe behaviors that are counter to expectations, they may feel less close to that person. This may be an initial reaction, and can be lessened through conversations, lunches together and deeper knowledge of each other. In a virtual team, however, the cultural differences combined with the physical distance can strengthen the psychological distance and the use of abstract thinking of the others.

To understand how the abstract thinking of remote colleagues forms 'us vs them' subgroups on virtual teams, I turned to a psychologist, Claudia Crisan. Claudia is a practicing Jungian Psychotherapist as well as a Learning & Development and Culture & Engagement Lead for Europe Functions and Categories for PepsiCo, located in Romania. With this background, she was the ideal expert to explain how the human mind and behaviors at work are connected. She began with the concept of duality as the basis to understand the impact of culture on a multi-location virtual team.

"Consciousness is formed through duality," she began. "You have to perceive the opposite in order to define some object. For instance, you can define a mountain only when you have a valley to contrast. When you see the object for itself, when you see its shape and its limits, what it

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is and what it is not, you can start to even further define more detailed things such as whether it is a rocky mountain or a tree-lined mountain.”

When people work on a global virtual team, an easily accessible contrast is the culture between locations. After all, culture is associated with a region or country; it is sometimes heard in accents, and it is noticed when colleagues begin to work together. The duality is easily established and is the reason the cultural identity in each person is triggered. When people work co-located with people from the same culture, cultural identity and the need for cultural boundaries are dormant. However, many people begin to identify with their culture when they are in a group of contrasts.

Turning to the Local Colleague

Claudia continued, “Whenever we meet someone new, we have a need for socializing. It is an innate need we have, but also the need of protecting and preserving what is ours. This latter need is kept alive through defense mechanisms. Another way to put this is that we are constantly bouncing between the individual need, that of adaptation, which offers novelty and individual development, and the need to be loyal to the collective, which offers safety. I am different, and because I am different there is also potential for problems. This activates our instinctual need for preserving what has worked for us for such a long time in the past.”

To avoid uncertainty and potential problems, we turn to that which is familiar. In the case of global virtual teams, the familiar is our local colleagues. We understand their language, their way of working, their references and their background. We can usually comprehend their point of view, and we have similar norms and ways of being. The connection is easy, seamless and effective. ‘Them over there’ becomes a reference for team members who are unpredictable, hard to understand and dare I use the word ‘strange.’

'Us vs Them' Tripod

I can summarize the phenomenon in three points:

1. We think of remote colleagues as psychologically distant and in more abstract terms.
2. Subgroups by location often use culture as the level of abstraction to define the duality.
3. The predictability of the local colleagues contrasts with the unpredictability of the distant colleagues, thereby contributing to the subgroups distinction.

These three points create the legs of the 'us vs them' tripod.

This problem can have a profound impact on how a hybrid team collaborates. The people in the different locations refer to the other colleagues in abstract terms, and often use negative cultural stereotypes. You might hear phrases like "they are always late," "they never understand," and "they take forever to get to their point." And each location subgroup looks for behavior to confirm their stereotypical image.

Each team may experience this phenomenon differently. At a mild level of 'us vs them,' the team members favor the ideas of local colleagues. At an extreme level, the location subgroups blame each other, stop sharing information and stop listening to each other.

Learning about the Other

Despite the danger that subgroups pose to hybrid virtual teams, a negative impact is not inevitable. Returning to Claudia one more time, she explained, "The more knowledge you have about something, the more detail you can distinguish. Once you know and accept the mountain, you can learn about its trees, pathways, and rivers." In the same way, team members can learn about each other's cultures, their communication

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styles and their work ethics so that these stop being sources of differentiation and instead become sources of enrichment. They can then discover and appreciate the unique characteristics of each person, regardless of the location.

About the Author

Theresa Sigillito Hollema has worked in and with global teams for over 25 years. As a cultural consultant and team facilitator, she has helped hundreds of leaders around the world learn how to excel when working with virtual, culturally diverse teams.

Theresa began her career in accounting and finance functions in the US, but always had an interest to work internationally. She took the chance on a short term assignment for a European based project and never looked back. She led programs and multicultural teams, particularly enjoying the post-merger integration work that crossed country borders. Theresa always found the cultural diversity in teams interesting and eventually turned her passion into a career.

Theresa joined Trompenaars Hampden-Turner, a leading cultural consulting firm, where she worked with teams and leaders from around the world. She is also trained as a team coach and has focused her attention on virtual work. Theresa now leads the team at InterAct Global, a group helping organizations capitalize on cultural diversity and virtual connections.

Theresa received her MBA from the University of Michigan in the US, including the Henry Ford II award for academic excellence.

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