

Virtual Team Successes and Stresses

A Case Study

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As widespread as diverse and dispersed teaming is these days, leading a virtual team can be a challenge. This case study offers ideas on making the best of diverse and dispersed team structures.

Virtual teaming, that is, working on teams whose members are not present in the same location, is a fact of our modern, globalized business world. Virtual (or diverse and dispersed) teams are prevalent not only in multinational companies with offices in different countries, but also in academic and non-governmental institutions with bases across the world. In such team structures, members often have to communicate and collaborate with others who could be thousands of miles and many time zones apart.

As widespread as diverse and dispersed teaming is these days, leading a virtual team can be a challenge. Team leaders need to not only account for practical matters such as scheduling across time zones, but also technical issues such as varying rates of connectivity and access to communication platforms. However, one of the biggest factors in creating successful collaboration among diverse and dispersed teams is culture – specifically, tailoring the team’s mission, plans and procedures to the preferences of the different cultures represented on the team.

The following is a case study provided by a Cultural Navigator subject matter expert in diverse and dispersed teaming:

“A virtual team leader named Rebecca, originally from the United States, recently led a virtual project team with members from Japan, Mexico, Germany, Korea and the US. Rebecca was focused on setting the team up for success, and although she deliberately used strategies and tools made available by her company, she learned some valuable lessons along the way.

“Before initiating the project with a kick-off meeting, Rebecca made sure that everyone filled out their Cultural Orientations Indicator (COI) assessment to get to know their own work-style preferences. She then invited all members into a team message board on the Cultural Navigator, and encouraged them to share their profiles to better understand each other’s work-style preferences.

“The team was not able to have a face-to-face kick-off meeting, so during their first virtual meeting, every team member took time to introduce him or herself. The members talked about the different preferences in their team using the non-judgmental vocabulary of the Cultural

Orientations Approach. At the end of the call, the team agreed on some ground rules for their upcoming teleconference and then closed the call.

“As the project continued, the team leader noticed that key team members were regularly not sharing their sales pipelines during their calls as agreed upon. Rebecca used humor during their sessions to lighten the mood, thinking some of the team members were nervous. However, she noticed the same people began to skip the calls, and were reluctant to speak when they were in attendance.”

In the above case study, the team leader Rebecca had done her due diligence in preparing the team to accommodate different cultural preferences among its members. But then she hit a snag. What had she done wrong?

The subject matter expert offered this reading of the situation: “In retrospect, Rebecca realized that even though she had set ground rules, she could have had an individual talk with each member before finalizing the team structure and processes. Perhaps in those discussions she would have understood that Woo-jin, her Korean colleague, worked in a strict hierarchical office environment and had to clear most decisions with his direct supervisor before sending anything to her. Woo-jin had hoped his team leader realized he did not have this approval, however Rebecca was not aware of this.

Similarly, the Japanese team member named Kamiko was concerned about the strict data protection laws in Japan, so she did not feel comfortable sharing her sales pipeline information. Kamiko had tried to indirectly convey this limitation to Rebecca, who wasn’t able to understand this message.

As for Rebecca’s use of humor during teleconferences, she did not realize how many cultural references she was using in her jokes, which her colleagues from outside her own culture had little understanding of.”

In essence, while Rebecca began the team’s collaboration with most of the components necessary for success, throughout the project duration, she learned the hard way that cultural mishaps often stall even the best plan.

While cultural due diligence and careful preparation are necessary components of working with a virtual team, the team leader and members need to exercise cultural awareness and cultural competence all along the way.

Though there can be challenges to working in diverse and dispersed teams, they are a fact of modern work life. The good news is that, when managed well, virtual teams can be as effective and productive as their traditional equivalents.

Questions:

- 1) What did the team leader notice during the team meeting (calls) and what did she tried to do to enhance the situation?
- 2) What should Rebeca had to do for each virtual worker and why?
- 3) What were the special situations with the Korean and the Japanese workers?
- 4) What the virtual leaders and the virtual members need to exercise?
- 5) How can the virtual teams be as effective and productive as their traditional equivalents?

Due date	Marks
End of week 7	5 marks

Useful links:

- <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/student services/documents/planning-and-preparing-to-write-assignments.pdf>
- APA reference system <https://student.unsw.edu.au/apa>
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Guidelines for the project assignment:

- ✓ This is an individual project, which is part from your course score. It requires effort and critical thinking.
- ✓ Use font Times New Roman, Calibri or Arial.
- ✓ Use 1.5 or double line spacing with left Justify all paragraphs.
- ✓ Use the footer function to insert page number.
- ✓ Ensure that you follow the APA style in your project.
- ✓ Your project report length should be between 400 to 600 words.