

# Communication Challenges and Solutions in Global Virtual Teams

Team 5

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## Abstract

Global virtual teams face many challenges. Perhaps the most difficult is communicating among themselves. When team members come from different cultures communication is difficult. Understanding the basics of virtual teams is critical to understanding how to communicate within a global virtual team. But teams must be careful to choose how they communicate. The cultures of the team members should be used to help the team decide their plan for effective communication. But inevitably all teams have miscommunication. This paper discusses ways to prevent and resolve miscommunication, and the skills needed to do so.

## Introduction

The increase of global virtual teams is a result of globalization.[1] The use of global virtual teams has grown rapidly to accommodate the requirements placed on organizations. For example, a new product is designed in United States, tested and assembled in Mexico, parts machined in China, program created in India, then the finished products will be sold to all over the world. Creating effective global teams is not an easy task for any organization, especially when such teams tend to need more time to be successful. When miscommunication and misunderstandings occur, stress and conflict among team members are heightened and not easily dispelled.[1]

Global team collaboration is complex, with or without new technology. The variety of cultural differences only makes team collaboration more complex. Global virtual teams have to be committed to develop new ground rules of knowledge sharing, communication, and social exchange in a technology mediated team environment.

## Basics of Virtual Teams

In traditional teams communication is easier, the team members can all gather up in the same location interacting face to face, discussing the progress of the team, and outline the next important steps to be taken for a successful project completion. Virtual teams typically face a much greater difficulty when communicating as team members attempt to interact, share ideas, and reach agreement without of the richness of face to face meetings. Given these constraints on communications, virtual team members have to use a variety of means to transmit information, meaning, and symbols over time and distance through one or more effective working methods to build a solid team which will overcome these challenges that might appear when working virtually.

Based on the research done by Earley and Mosakowski, teams that are very different or teams that are very similar were more productive than teams that are only partially diverse.[2] Other researchers have observed that teams with high diversity were more efficient in solving problems as each had a different perspective and could combine ideas to solve the problem. Each team member brings unique ideas, communication style, and cultural behavior. These unique skills require various forms of media for global virtual teams to communicate effectively. Media that provides a closer and more personal interaction between members is a rich media. Rich media is a media that allows communication to be as similar as possible to a face to face meeting. Simply put, the more interactive a communication is, the richer it is. For example, a web conference with audio and video is a rich media. The audio and video helps the team to communicate synchronously which reduces time and effort to convey a message. All team members are able to see everyone's demeanor, gestures, and body language during the meeting. On the other hand lean media, such as text messages or emails, do not provide close and personal interaction. It is difficult to build trust with emails alone.

Planning and creating an online workspace which enhances the success and commitment of the team. It is highly important that the team members focus their effort to understand the given technological tools and use them as their main source of communication.[3]. Virtual teams mostly use emails, audio and video conferencing such as Skype for their meetings. It can also include face to face meetings generally towards the end of a particular quarter of their product cycle. One of the important characteristic of a successful virtual team is their ability to reorganize and adapt when situation demands to perform well in order to achieve the goals.

## Culture and Technology

Virtual teams have varying levels of difficulty when using information technology. Even virtual teams that have the most-talented workers, a good level of leadership, and frequent touch points, can be torn apart by poor technology.[4] It is recommended to use platforms that integrate all types of communication and include these key components: conference calling, direct calling and text messaging, emails, discussion forums or virtual team rooms. Communications effectiveness among virtual teams is also impacted by other factors such as culture and technology.[5] What is culture? Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another.”[6] Culture is different in many ways according to nationality, ethnicity, or even organizational settings. In global virtual teams, culture may have a significant impact on how individuals perceive information, act upon it, and relate to other individuals. When team members communicate, they tend to filter information through their cultural lenses. It will create a potentially broad range of misinterpretations or distortions.[5]

Brewer defines affordances as the way a technology is used because of perceived and actual characteristics.[7] Different types of technology have different affordances. For example, immediate feedback is an affordance of synchronous communication technologies, such as web conferences. This is an important concept. The technology we choose to use can limit the content of our message. Phone calls can convey tone of voice but they cannot convey facial expressions. Not only can the technology we choose to use limit the content of our message but cultural experience can limit our message as well. According to Brewer this is because technology is not neutral.[7] The value of technology changes from culture to culture. Having different forms of technology available is very helpful. Skype for Business is an easy to use platform. Features of Skype for Business include instant messaging, voice-over-ip for person to person and conference calls, screen sharing, and web conferences with video. Depending on the situation, users can use the method that has the appropriate affordances.

Often, cultural diversity can lead to communication problems in virtual teams. This is due a misunderstanding of what was said and the conclusions reached are different than expected. One major dimension of cultural variability is individualism versus collectivism.[6] In individualistic cultures, the needs, values, and goals of the individual take precedence over the needs, values, and goals of the ingroup. In collectivist cultures, the needs, values, and goals of the ingroup take precedence over the needs, values, and goals of the individual.[8] According to the research by Hofstede individualistic cultures tend to be less influenced by group membership and can interact with new groups more efficiently than collectivist cultures.[6] When team members do not understand what is said by others more time than usual is spent encoding and decoding messages and this can cause problems in decision making. There may be trouble also when scheduling meetings with the team due to difference in time zones and the availability of the team members. For example if there are teams from Oregon, Arizona and some team from eastern zone then it would be difficult to schedule meetings.

Often communication in virtual teams can lead to problems due to cultural diversity as people can misunderstand what is said and can draw conclusions different than expected. Managers and team members need to know how diversity helps in building up a strong team. In diverse teams people tend to be more innovative as each of them are from a different background. Diverse teams were better at problem solving as each have a different perspective of the problem at hand.

## Miscommunication in Virtual Teams

Global virtual teams often face challenges which can affect the performance of the team. The team members should choose a good communication channel to track the progress of the tasks. Often the individuals have less commitment and less clarity of their goals and it makes the team less committed and less reliable. Sometimes the team members can also feel neglected because there is no social interaction with the rest of the team. In such situations a good leader needs to be familiar working with a diverse team. A leader that can drive the team together.

According to Brewer, domestic virtual teams have just as many issues stemming from miscommunication as multinational virtual teams do. The difference is that miscommunication in a multinational team is more difficult to correct. The following will provide strategies on how to prevent, identify, and correct miscommunication in domestic and multinational virtual teams.[7] There are many strategies for preventing miscommunication. According to studies by Brewer, the most commonly used strategies for preventing miscommunication are requesting clarification and repeating information, apologizing for delays, asking others to check details, and following up communication with a different form of medium.[7] Repeating and asking for confirmation is an easy way to avoid miscommunication. A higher degree of confidence is attained when information can be accurately paraphrased. The strategy of repeating and asking for confirmation is smartly paired with the strategy of following up with a different medium. Following up with a different medium ensures contact information and creates a record of action items generated during other forms of communication. Experience has shown that it is good practice to follow up phone conversations with suppliers or vendors with an email to verify contact information and create a written record of what we discussed. Also, following up instant message conversations and meetings with emails to ensure action items are accurately captured.

Some of the strategies to resolve miscommunication are the same strategies to prevent miscommunication. Being clear, concise, and explicit when interacting with team members is always important. Brewer suggests using short and simple sentences.[7] Another strategy that works for preventing and correcting miscommunication is following up communications with another form of media. Additional strategies to correct miscommunication described by Brewer are evaluate before taking action, and knowing when to be silent.[7] It is important to digest and fully understand information provided by other team members. English is not everyone's first language. Past experience shows that taking a moment to consider what a team member is attempting communicate is helpful. Asking questions to get clarification goes a long way. Alternatively, being silent can be just as helpful. As the sender of information pausing frequently and being silent for some time lets the receiver think through the information that was just provided. The receiver should be allowed as much time as needed to fully understand the information provided. They can ask questions when they are ready or let you continue providing information. When receiving information you should remain silent to allow the sender all the time they need to convey their message.

## Skills for Effective Communication

Keeping effective communication is important. We have been seeing so many failure or breakdown cases within global teams around us. For example, one project which was initiated with team members from around North America. Specifically, a team member in the other location would continually say that his task would be complete tomorrow. The American team members would take the words at face value and expect the task to be complete tomorrow. However, the team member in the other location had a different definition for tomorrow. When he said tomorrow it meant that the task would be completed at some future time, not necessarily tomorrow. Despite best efforts the project still failed because of a cultural difference in how time is perceived.

There are a couple strategies presented by Brewer which helped us to define the best skills required for effective communication.[7] An initial step is choosing team members that will best fit into the purpose and the goals of the project. Trying to create open discussions and listening to others assumptions and perceptions are important topics that need to be addressed as an ice-breaker.[9] This will help the team to understand other team members point of view and to create some discussion which will clarify the rules, the purpose, and at the same time will help to prevent misinterpretations in the future when they start working together.

Even though team is virtual it should be at least one face to face meeting. This will help the team to spend more time working effectively on the purpose of the project without any outside distractions or technical difficulties.[10] We can get deeper in this topic by providing a real example. Right now in the class of communication and team building we are not able to have face to face meetings all the time. That is why we rely on Google Hangouts to have online meetings and keep the flow moving. Some of the technical difficulties we have run into when having this meetings are the low internet speed and dropping off the calls is preventing the person to keep track on the meeting. Putting him/her behind the conversation or making somebody repeat what it was already said. The option to access the meeting on your phone wherever you are can create noise interruptions. If you are driving home after a long day and is time for the meeting team members will hear the traffic and the noises from the streets, creating distractions and difficulties to communicate with each other.

By having a face to face meeting the team members will be able to share ideas and at the same time get a sense of the team member's personalities which is harder to do when having an online meeting.[11] There are many cases when the face to face meeting is impossible. In these cases, the best alternative is a virtual meeting using both video and audio at the same time. This will add a level of importance to the meeting. The team should decide which technology is best to use, skype, google hangout, etc. For example, Catalina uses Skype for work because 80% of her job is based on the communication and follow ups with people from other countries. This technology tool is amazingly helpful because it allows her to not only have meetings with people around the globe, but to use this resource as a medium to build a relationship with the customers and suppliers. Skype allows video, audio, screen sharing (allowing others to see your screen), conference calls, gives a direct number in case you have limited internet access, and send instant messages. All these features help her to do her job without the need of having face to face meetings.

Developing trust is also important factor for global success and stay in high performance. The global teams are using electronic communications to coordinate their work become more common, so understanding how trust develops in global virtual teams is very important for organizations.[13] There are many ways to develop trust such as use research, data and logic to analytical and show proof and deliver factual, clear results; show a promise executed and delivered on time; get people involved on a real, results-oriented level; communicate to vision to give team big picture; listen

what team member ideas; challenge team members' thinking and encourage them.

## Conclusion

Organizations cannot be built on electronic networks alone, if they were we would need an completely new sociology of organizations.[14] Regardless of the organization, effective communication plays a key role in teams. Miscommunication is present in all teams. For global virtual teams miscommunication represents a challenge that is sometimes insurmountable. Preventing miscommunication is the best possible way to avoid such an insurmountable challenge. By using explicit and simple sentences, and repeating information in different ways miscommunication may be prevented. Allowing the team to choose how they communicate is also important to preventing miscommunication. Sometimes miscommunication cannot be prevented. A few of the same methods to prevent miscommunication can also be used to resolve it. However, care must be taken to ensure the miscommunication is resolved quickly. If left unresolved the team will not be successful.

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