

**THERESA SIGILLITO HOLLEMA**

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



**VIRTUAL  
TEAMS  
ACROSS  
CULTURES**

**Create Successful Teams  
Around the World**

“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

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# Three Ways Culture Impacts Global Virtual Teams

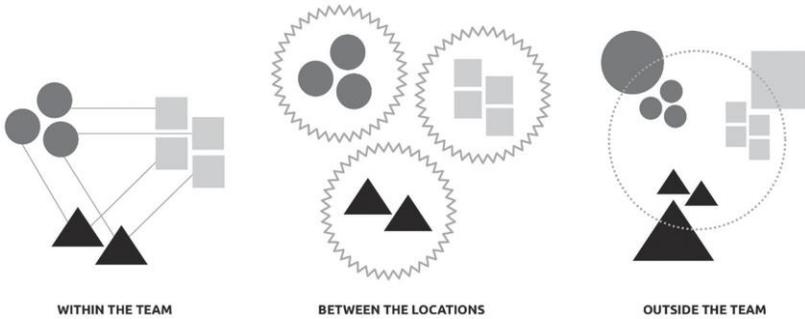
People on global virtual teams have more reasons to develop cultural competence than people on multicultural co-located teams. This may seem paradoxical since virtual team members sit in their own countries and breathe in the air of their own cultures. But they are still part of a multicultural team, and the underlying component of geographic distance can create the conditions for culture to be even more impactful. In this section, I will use theory and concrete examples to explain how culture impacts virtual teams. You will see why cultural diversity is a critical element at the center of the CALDO model.

This chapter has three sections based on how cultural diversity impacts global virtual teams.

**I. Culture within the Team:** This section expands on the work of thought leaders who have written about cultural diversity by looking at examples within virtual teams.

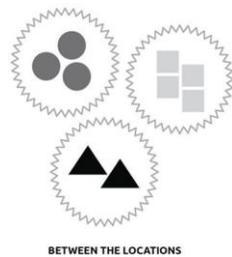
**II. Culture between the Locations:** Team members may think differently about their local colleagues compared to their distant colleagues. Culture is a common identifier to create subgroups.

**III. Culture outside the Team:** The team may be surprised as to how the cultural environments where the team members are located can have consequences for virtual team.



## 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.<sup>8</sup> 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

Theory to virtual teams as a means to understand the formation of subgroups.<sup>9</sup> 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.

8. Trope Y. and Liberman N., (2010) "Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance." *Psychological Review*, 2010 Apr, 117(2), pp. 440–463.

9. Wilson J., Crisp C.B. and Mortensen M. (2013) "Extending Construal-Level Theory to Distributed Groups: Understanding the Effects of Virtuality." *Organization Science*, Vol. 24, No. 2.