Michał Chmielecki

Clark University,
Worcester, USA
mjchmielecki@gmail.com
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2863-6011

Leading Intercultural Virtual Teams During the COVID-19 Pandemic – Research Results

ABSTRACT

Objective: The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has been officially classified as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), meaning the infection is progressing faster and faster in many countries simultaneously. The United States of America has announced a travel ban on 28 European countries, many countries have closed universities, schools and kindergartens, and large gatherings of people have been forbidden. Many companies including Google, Apple and Microsoft encourage or mandate employees to adopt a work-from-home policy. For companies in the modern technology industry, the infrastructure and policy necessary for remote working are undoubtedly already implemented. However, for many smaller companies and organizations

the situation was very different. Remote working and virtual team management did not occur or were limited to only a few people. The aim of the article is to present the problems of leading virtual intercultural teams, with particular emphasis on the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology: Contemporary texts in the domain of cross-cultural leadership have been reviewed. Relevant existing research has been reviewed and primary research conducted. The latter consisted of 24 IDIs (Individual In-depth Interviews) with employees from various Polish organizations.

Findings: The COVID-19 pandemic has forced thousands of enterprises to let their employees work remotely, but many of these companies were not as technologically prepared for the situation as they thought. We are faced with increasing international cooperation and coordination. The outbreak of COVID-19 has accelerated the need for clear standards in remote and virtual teamwork. The article analyzed the positive and negative aspects of the impact of COVID-19 on organizations and ways of virtual leadership.

Value Added: This article answers the questions about the main problems faced by managers who had to lead teams in a virtual way.

Recommendations: The author is aware of the fact that this is only an exploratory study. It is recommended that in order to gain a fuller picture of the issues underlying the findings, quantitative research with large number of respondents should be undertaken.

Key words: leadership, COVID-19, teams, pandemic

JEL codes: M1, M16

Introduction

The success of the 21st century organization depends on its ability to adapt to the constant changes taking place in the environment, especially in the labor market, where it is represented by multinational, and therefore multicultural, labor resources. National, international, and transnational enterprises face new challenges and are forced to use the cultural diversity of their members for the purposes of the organization (Chmielecki, 2013).

Migration of employees and the globalization of companies mean that the number of people working in culturally diverse teams is increasing, and

more and more managers are managing people from different parts of the world, with different views and a different understanding of the concepts of cooperation and duty. Managing staff in monocultural teams is a difficult skill that faces many obstacles and challenges (Sułkowski, 2020). Undoubtedly, however, a higher level of difficulty and, at the same time, a higher level of human potential are represented by managers managing multicultural teams.

Culture and cross-cultural communication

Contemporary conditions for the functioning of companies in the market economy, combined with the development of information and communication tools and technologies, the emergence of business internationalization, delegations and transfers of employees, national and international migrations, as well as demographic transformations of the workforce contribute to the increase in the cultural diversity of human resources in the organization (Winkler, 2008, p. 17).

Today's workforce is multicultural, namely it is a mix of people from different cultures, ethnic groups and lifestyles, and in order for companies to function better in this reality, they must understand what multiculturalism is and how it affects the activities of the organization. Therefore, one should start by explaining the concept of culture that has as many definitions as there are participants (Chmielecki, 2009).

Already in 1962 J. G. Herder wrote that there is nothing more imprecise than the word culture (Jawor, 2009, p. 13). This German philosopher characterizes culture as a way of adapting to the environment, through generational transmission, and it is this tradition that significantly influences the formation of a man. On the other hand, the English scholar Eduard Burnett Taylor uses the concept of culture interchangeably with the term civilization and says that "it is a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, laws, customs and other abilities and habits acquired by people as members of society" (Tylor, 1871).

Culture is a complex mix of assumptions, behaviors, stories, myths, metaphors, and other concepts that are the ingredients of belonging to a given society (Chmielecki, 2013).

Intercultural business communication is in comparison with intercultural communication or business communication a relatively young field of study (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2003). It is also quite often neglected as a dimension of business (Brislin, 1994). Intercultural business communication has grown into a complex discipline.

Because of constantly increasing intercultural contacts and global interdependence, leaders and managers are simply forced to "rethink" intercultural communication in order to acquire effective intercultural communication and leadership competence which are becoming more relevant in the increasingly multicultural organisations and communities that people live and work in today (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005 ; Mączyński, Sułkowski, & Przytuła, 2019).

Globalization of leadership

Globalization reduces and removes physical, technological, political and social barriers between countries, creating an integrated global market. The word globalization is often replaced with terms such as internationalization, social integration or transnationalization of the economy. However, these terms have slightly different meanings. Internationalization of the economy in the traditional sense of these words means the development of international relations with relatively independent economies and national enterprises. Thus, it is a quantitative process relating to the increase in foreign trade or capital flows. Economic integration, on the other hand, is an element of globalization. During the process of globalization, markets, economies and business entities are integrated. The transnationalization of the economy is the degree of "ties between the economy and the world economy mainly through the operation of transnational corporations" (Liberska, 2002, p. 19).

Contemporary globalization differs significantly from earlier forms of internationalization of economic life. It is characterized by an increasing mobility of capital and goods, it is accompanied by technical progress on an unprecedented scale, transaction costs of economic cooperation with foreign countries fall sharply, the importance of geographical distances and time zone differences decrease. Companies operating in the conditions of globalization of the world economy should effectively use all existing opportunities created by the globalization processes. Enterprises can look for their competitive advantage by introducing a strategy of internationalization of their activities. Entering foreign markets can significantly improve the company's competitive position (Chmielecki, 2012).

Correct entry into foreign markets requires knowledge of many aspects of international business. One of them is cultural differences in negotiations.

The migratory movement in the world between 1960 and 2005 increased from 75 million to almost 191 million migrants, in Europe the number of migrants amounted to 64.116 million people, which is 8.8% of the entire population of the continent (United Nations, 2006). In view of the above, the ability to cooperate and operate in conditions of multinationality, i.e. organizational multiculturalism, is so important because this ability to co-operate, apart from the art of generating knowledge and innovation, is the fundamental prerequisite for success.

Multicultural organizations

In connection with the issue discussed above, the definition of a multicultural organization is worth considering here. In the literature on the subject, it is defined as an organization within which there is a noticeable diversification of human resources in the intra- and intercultural scope.

On the other hand, the most characteristic features of such an organization are pluralism, acculturation, and integration. In such an economic unit, values, customs, assumptions, and dogmas of different cultures coexist

and interact with each other. Here, too, there is a particular variation of the course of socialization, consisting in the individual accepting cultural content different from those acquired earlier.

In a multicultural organization, a specific organizational dialogue is noticeable, according to which the representations of different cultures democratically determine decisions on an equal footing, therefore there is no overriding cultural orientation – on the contrary, the right proportion of minority representatives at the company levels is sought and carefully directed to eliminate the phenomena of social discrimination against cultural minorities. Multicultural organizations include international governmental and non-governmental organizations, multinational enterprises and transnational corporations (Winkler, 2008, p. 27).

International Government Organizations are relatively permanent unions of at least three sovereign states, formed as a result of an international agreement of these states. Most often they are non-profit organizations, for example the Council of Europe or the European Union.

On the other hand, **International Non-Government Organizations** are associations established under an act which is a private agreement, whose members are natural persons from at least three countries, and their activity is aimed at obtaining private funds for the implementation of public purposes. As a rule, they are also non-profit organizations, represented by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights.

Multinational Enterprises are organizations that operate and make direct investments in more than one country, and their activity is most often based on a large number of relatively small companies in individual countries. They are characterized by a gradual decentralization in decision-making, and the representatives of this type of organizations are Daewoo Corporation, LG Electronics Incorporated.

Transnational Organizations are usually established outside the country from which the capital comes, and the people employed are employees from the investor's country as well as the local population. These

enterprises do not show a political character and do not identify with any country, they only engage in profit-oriented activities in an area that exceeds the borders of one country.

The above list of multicultural organizations clarifies the understanding of this concept; however, it is not complete, due to the widespread cooperation of representatives of different nations within one organization. An excellent example of internationalization within regional blocs is the European Union, which provides citizens of the Member States with the right to freely emigrate to other EU countries. As a result, they can take up work under the same conditions as nationals of a foreign country, and also use the same benefits that are used by employed workers of a given country. As a result, an increasing number of small and medium-sized enterprises, public or private, representing various industries (e.g. construction, education, hotels and restaurants, social welfare, production and service activities, transport, or retail and wholesale) are representatives of multicultural organizations (Winkler, 2008, pp. 27–30).

Intercultural virtual teams

The interest rising around global virtual teams is quite similar to the one around teamwork in the 1980s. One of the lessons scientists learned at that time was that organizations could not simply bring these teams in and immediately expect them to work in an efficient way. It usually takes both effort and time to see the benefits. Both creating and managing intercultural virtual teams requires a similar investment. Nevertheless, if this is done in a correct manner, building global virtual teams can produce greater benefits than traditional – monocultural teams.

Benefits of going global

- Access to talented people around the globe: Global virtual teams open up numerous opportunities around the globe and enable certain people to work with certain cultures.

• Diverse perspectives: Research clearly shows that when teams break through conflict caused by diversity, the benefits of new insights, thoughts and perspectives often lead to innovative and unconventional solutions.

• Local advantage: Due to the global composition of these teams, local team members become representatives and experts in their international market.

Benefits of being virtual

• Reduced costs: With the application of smartwork and global virtual teams, international travel, dining and accommodation fees are minimized or non-existent while maintaining the benefits of having team members from different locations and with different perspectives.

• Quicker and smarter responses: Communicating via email or other text-based technologies gives team members enough time to respond in a more thoughtful way.

• Greater responsiveness and flexibility: Globally linked technology solutions give rapid access to the required information.

One of the ways used by organizations to overcome these problems and build high-performance global virtual teams is by developing the intercultural competences of the team members.

In connection with the above list, a conclusion arises that a positive attitude to diversity, integrating it with the system and culture of the organization, as well as its effective management can provide the company with many benefits. The positive impact of multiculturalism on the effectiveness of employees is noticed by many researchers of this topic and explained with such arguments as:

• Finance – synergy in conditions of a high level of differentiation minimizes the degree of fluctuation and absenteeism, and also guarantees a high level of work efficiency.

• Personnel policy – cultural diversity of the organization ensures the attractiveness of jobs for experts and specialists from national minorities.

• Marketing – cultural diversity of employees makes it easier to understand different market segments, and thus allows for better matching of advertising campaigns to relevant markets.

• Employee creativity – cultural diversity is a determinant of a high level of innovation in teamwork when resolving disputable issues, and additionally stimulates creativity.

• Quality of the decisions made – cultural diversity in the organization influences the diversification of the perspectives of perceiving the issues under consideration.

• Flexibility of the management system – cultural diversity of the working staff enforces an increase in the flexibility of management and operation of an economic entity (Winkler, 2008, p. 31).

Problems in leading cross-cultural teams during the COVID-19 pandemic – research results

Contemporary texts in the domain of cross-cultural leadership have been reviewed. Relevant existing research has been reviewed and primary research conducted (table 1). The latter consisted of 24 IDIs (Individual In-depth Interviews) with employees from various Polish organizations.

Table 1. Research methods used in the study

Research metod	Type of research	Research sample
Desk research	Qualitative	–
IDI	Qualitative	24

Source: own study.

Most respondents were between 25–35 years of age (12) and 35–45 (9). The vast majority of respondents came from SMEs (21). The author is aware of the fact that the study has only a fragmentary, exploratory character. The majority of respondents come from the manufacturing sector (7), as well as IT (6), finance (4) and consulting (3). Because of the limitations (length of the paper) only a few respondents' answers will be cited to represent each problem.

Problems with building trust

To communicate more effectively across different cultures, leaders and managers need to develop intercultural sensitivity, good relationships, and trust. According to Ackley and Barker (2001) there are four criteria to assess intercultural sensitivity:

1) Positive feelings about interacting with people from other cultures;
2) Positive feelings of people from other cultures towards an individual;
3) Successful completion of work;
4) Freedom from stress related to contact with culture.

Mutual trust plays a more and more important role in successful operations of international teams, but managers and leaders freely acknowledge that trust is not easy to achieve – especially in virtual teams, where there is uncertainty and incomplete knowledge of all group members. Trust is a key condition for successful and effective teamwork.

[R14]

"Despite the benefits of technology for virtual team communication, teammates benefit greatly from face-to-face contact, especially at the start of a project. This helps in establishing working relationships and building trust."

Grosse (2001) states that managers in virtual teams see travel as necessary to develop relationships. Establishing a personal relationship is an important reason for a business trip, but not necessarily the only one.

Problems with ethnocentrism

People with an ethnocentric attitude consider their own culture to be the best, an exemplary one to follow, and at the same time evaluate other cultures through the prism of their own, which results in treating these differences as anomalies and deviations from the norm. When the criteria of one's own culture become the determinant of assessing the way of life of other communities, it can lead to amazement, aversion, condemnation, and

even hostility and the willingness to impose one's own culture on others, because "what's ours is the best".

Ethnocentrism has several varieties: fundamentalism, i.e. the natural and common, psychocultural identification of an individual with their own group and its values and the inability to completely detach themselves from those values; moderate ethnocentrism characterized mainly by the affirmation of one's own values and a relatively low level of depreciation of foreign patterns; aggressive ethnocentrism, characterized by the absolute hegemony of one's own values and the lack of tolerance for other norms.

Ethnocentrism strengthens the identification of an individual with the group, but on the other hand, such a vision of reality divided into one's own kind and strangers is at the fore of the group's resistance to external innovative activities, and also hinders interethnic communication, which in turn fosters conflicts.
[R10]

"A phenomenon worth emphasizing, resulting from the occurrence of multiculturalism in the organization, is the belief in the special value of one's own culture, overwhelming others. Attitudes towards diversity may be different, even very emotional, but the encounter with otherness and strangeness usually evokes ethnocentric attitudes, affirming the culture of one's own group, while diminishing other cultures."
[R3]

"It is very important to understand the nature and essence of diversity and multiculturalism, it will allow for understanding different behaviors and differences, which in turn will facilitate their acceptance and respect."
[R14]

"Despite the equal opportunities policy applied in most companies, you should not treat everyone equally, you should be able to feel what it is like to be somebody else's shoes, in other words, show some empathy."
[R2]

"Fears and the lack of willingness to talk about the issues of diversity and multiculturalism are the reason why minor problems turn into larger conflicts."

[R4]

"Getting to know your own feelings better allows the group members to intensify effective cooperation. Effective cooperation is also fostered by tolerance, i.e. an open, objective and respectful approach to the attitudes, views and characteristics of another person or community. Complex processes of cooperation between people cannot do without communication, which is an essential element for the emergence, development and maintenance of human interaction, organization and culture."

Problems with the approach to planning, setting goals and time management

Approaches to project management tasks such as planning, goal setting, and task assignment vary by culture (Milosevic, 1999).

Varner (2001) discusses other important cultural influences on team dynamics, such as giving and receiving criticism and feedback, willingness to participate and propose ideas, and supervisor contradiction.

Getting to know each of the strengths and origins of each team member early in the project has proven to be a valuable strategy. Some teams have used this knowledge by playing on each other's strengths and minimizing weaknesses. Recognizing that teammates had different levels of knowledge, experience, skills and abilities, these teams spread the workload accordingly. [R21]

"For example, a team member from a monochrome culture with excellent organizational skills can guide the allocation of tasks and monitor the implementation of each part of a project. A team member with good time management skills builds a timeframe and keeps others on track to complete the project.

The interpersonal skills of another person from a pro-partnership culture help in resolving conflicts and building group consensus when the team disagrees. One of the team members may be weak in time management and

strong in interpersonal skills. Another person may be lacking in technical knowledge and may rely on their internet-literate teammates."

Positive changes

Many have found that working with people from different cultures has enriched the experience for everyone.

Diversity brings a wider range of expertise, resources, and perspectives to projects. They commented on how each person added a different perspective and helped their teammates see things from a different angle.

Diversity stimulated new ideas and increased creativity. Working in teams changed their view of how people from certain cultures behave and erased stereotypes.

Managers have identified clear benefits of working in multicultural teams. Most of them described the experience as extremely positive. They found it fun and interesting to learn about other people's cultures while doing work. As a by-product of their work, they learned how to communicate effectively with people all over the world.

[R7]

"Employees exchanged information beyond the scope of the project and broadened their knowledge about different people, cultures and places. In this way, they made new friendships."

The joy of working as a team was one of the three key factors that Snow, Snell, Davison and Hambrick (1996) identified as critical to the success of an international team. The other two key success factors are commitment to the team's mission and standards as well as reliability in carrying out the assigned tasks.

[R9]

"I have found that intercultural competences help to increase team effectiveness when people from different cultures actively explore differ-ent people's point of view. Something like, 'I'd like to hear more about your thoughts.' This gives them an invitation to share."

[R4]

"It seems necessary at this point to emphasize that the cultural differences that take place between members of the community are not the main source of problems. On the contrary, it is rather the way in which problems arising from multiculturalism are treated, that is, how members relate to them both individually and collectively."

The very dissimilarity can positively affect the processes of knowledge development at the individual, collective and organizational level. However, it should be born in mind that the mental patterns, ways of perceiving the environment and value systems represented by individuals of other cultures can "shed new light" on well-known issues and "truths", both stimulating individual people to revise their beliefs, as well as driving them to new searches.

[R8]

"An interesting example from my team is when someone in Asia offered feedback and took risks by speaking to his manager more than he would in a different setting. They learned a new behavior and tried it out in a global virtual team. It's very rare to see it, but when you do, it's magical."

[R7]

"Being very aware of differences existing in both values and beliefs, communication styles, approaches to conflict, decision making, problem-solving and negotiation may help teams overcome cultural differences. Additionally, team members can break down language barriers by showing respect for other cultures and languages."

[R18]

"Cultural differences are something invisible and intangible, they influence the way we understand the world, hence they can be frustrating, difficult to unravel and often unpredictable. However, if we include practices in international business in certain logical values and models, we can reduce the feeling of the fear of the unknown, and what is more, we can derive various benefits from this dissimilarity."

[R1]

"An effective way of achieving successes, not failures, by a culturally diverse group is learning from other members of the organization, learning a variety of solutions and accompanying techniques, both in selecting employees, motivating or practical technical solutions.

It should be emphasized here that increasing the awareness of diversity improves interpersonal relations and builds a good reputation of the company in its management, and by creating a positive image, attracts talented candidates for work and improves the quality of the company's human capital."

[R9]

"International participants were more likely to share their comments using virtual meeting software than in face-to-face context."

[R22]

"Treating diversity as a positive and valuable element of the organization increases the level of loyalty and trust among employees, which in turn has a positive impact on the atmosphere and organizational culture, and also fosters intense commitment."

[R6]

"Technology and communication that it enables gives companies a competitive advantage in an international environment. Technology helps people in remote locations connect and build relationships without having to travel. Employees who travel can stay in close contact with their home office. Virtual teams enable companies to achieve goals faster and more efficiently."

Summary

Differences resulting from the various national origins of company employees contribute to the different perceptions and understanding of selected collective activities and management decisions. Differences also create the need to take appropriate actions to transform the solutions used within the organization of work. The phenomenon of diversity very often is the cause

of negative human attitudes that are hostile to people distinguished solely on the basis of group membership.

Discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes are examples of harmful and unjustifiable reactions against a given group. The above-mentioned components of human attitudes often lead to difficulties in understanding the potential benefits of diversity. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze and understand the reasons for the occurrence of these phenomena in order to minimize their occurrence in the development of effective multicultural teams.

By working with other people, we learn from each other, and thus the more diverse our partners are, the more we can learn. Diversity in an organization is nowadays perceived as an ambivalent feature, which means that it can contribute to achieving success, but it can also turn out to be an element leading to failure. Multiculturalism can be considered a determinant of the success of an organization. When this resource is effectively managed, we can observe greater creativity of employee teams, avoiding the group-thinking syndrome, and above all advantages in a competitive game. Otherwise, diversity may become the cause of conflict and incoherence, which results in transferring stereotypes to the organization's disadvantage, poor communication combined with incorrect interpretation of various situations and events.

In the globalized world, the ability to navigate markets with different, national, culture specificity and the ability to manage teams of people from different cultures can determine victory over one's competitors.

The awareness and ability to deal with diversity, as well as being able to benefit from it, ensures the development of the organization, and becomes an asset in achieving a competitive advantage. Cultural competences enable mutual understanding and effective cooperation in international work teams. Cultural diversity in the workplace also fosters the challenges of knowledge and innovation.

Promoting equal opportunities for all, irrespective of race, religion, sex, and age, creates an atmosphere of mutual understanding of tolerance and acceptance of different values. The problems of cultural diversity significantly

affect the nature of personnel policy, stimulating the creation and dissemination of knowledge, as well as promoting the creativity of employee teams. Nevertheless, in order for this cultural difference to have a positive effect in the functioning of the organization, cultural knowledge is necessary, as it will allow to develop an appropriate intercultural dialogue, change social awareness and avoid social conflicts.

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