

# Chapter X

## Creating Synergy for Inter-Cultural Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*Internationally distributed teams (IDTs) face challenges related to the team members' diversity and geographic dispersion. However, research on IDTs has yet to explore the joint effects of diversity and dispersion on team processes and performance, as well as the role that cultural norms play in IDT effectiveness. Reporting findings from an 11-week e-mail exchange between American and Finnish business students, the current chapter focuses on how and why cultural communication and coordination norms affect IDT team processes and performance. The data shows that differences in cultural norms were amplified by differences in the local context of IDT members and that successful IDTs also created group norms that helped them manage their cultural diversity and geographic dispersion. Given the teachers' discovery of how they had unintentionally reinforced cultural communication and coordination norms, the authors make explicit how cultural norms unexpectedly influence leadership strategies and learning experiences in positive and negative ways.*

### CREATING SYNERGY FOR INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Internationally distributed teams (IDTs) consist of team members who are located in different countries and locations around the globe, and

who have different cultural backgrounds. In the past decades, international organizations have increasingly used these teams to tap into a larger pool of human and technological resources. On the other hand, previous research on this relatively new form of teamwork has shown that IDTs face

challenges to their productivity and efficiency that are due both to the team members' diversity and geographic dispersion. Most of this research focuses on the effect of one or the other characteristic of IDTs on team performance. Research on IDTs, however, that addresses both the effects of multicultural background and geographic distribution and their interaction on team processes and performance is rare.

The purpose of the current chapter is to explore the specific challenges due to both characteristics and their interaction for communication and coordination behaviors in IDTs. Furthermore, we explore the creation of specific group norms that might help manage these challenges. Using data from an international classroom collaboration between senior undergraduate students in Finland and the USA, we combine different bodies of literature and different approaches to teaching and research to examine the dynamic influence of cultural norms and group norms on interactions between the team members of these IDTs. Moreover, we introduce a unique pedagogical approach to facilitate the team members' cross-cultural understanding of communication and coordination, which are both part of a successful collaboration.

## **COMMON CHALLENGES TO IDT FUNCTIONING**

Some of the most important challenges to team functioning in IDTs relate to communication and coordination among IDT members. Challenges with regard to coordination patterns include (1) frequent breakdowns in communication media such as e-mail and phone (e.g., Hart & McLeod, 2003; Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Hinds & Mortensen, 2005), (2) failure to share sufficient contextual information among team members to ensure successful collaboration (Cramton, 2001, 2002), (3) attributions of failure to communicate and

collaborate to other team members rather than to situational factors (Cramton, Orvis, & Wilson, 2007), and (4) delayed detection of these issues (Mark, 2002).

Challenges to communication patterns in IDTs include (1) lack of contextual knowledge and cues, information sharing, and inclusive communication, which ultimately results in a lack of shared understanding among team members (Cramton, 2001, 2002), (2) repeated misunderstandings among team members and misinterpretations of information which leads to frustration, to a loss of trust, and to conflict among the team members (e.g., Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), and (3) ambiguity of the meaning of silence which often leads to a breakdown of communication between team members (Cramton 2001, 2002).

Interestingly, research on communication and coordination challenges in IDTs so far has not combined the effects of team members' multicultural background and their geographic dispersion on team processes. While coordination challenges have been researched separately in a multicultural context (e.g., Brislin & Kim, 2003) and in a geographically dispersed context (e.g., Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001), it has overlooked how differences in cultural coordination norms affect the way team members interact across distance. Likewise, research on communication challenges has mainly focused on the problems related to company communication via technology (i.e., e-mail, chat, phone, videoconferencing, etc.; e.g., Cramton 2001, 2002), and has not yet explored the role and effect of different cultural communication norms on communication across distance.

There is evidently a significant lack of research on the actual processes that lead from differences in cultural norms and factors of geographic distribution to actual teamwork outcomes such as team performance or satisfaction with the team (Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001). In addition, to our

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