

**LEADING MULTINATIONAL TEAMS:
STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS**

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LEADING MULTINATIONAL TEAMS: STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

In today's globalised corporate world, multinational teams are a key driver of organisational success, but managing them is not without any challenges.

This paper explores how cultural differences towards hierarchy, communication, time, urgency, and self-expression influence the overall team collaboration, and what leaders can do to transform these differences into strengths. Based on interviews with leaders and team members from the real estate and news media industry, the study identifies the importance of adaptive leadership, culturally sensitive communication, and the ability to foster a sense of psychological safety as primary while working within a multinational team. It shows that successful leaders don't use one-size-fit-all approaches, they listen, adapt, and work to bridge cultural differences. The paper gives several practical recommendations for organisations, such as investing in cultural intelligence training, establishing clear and inclusive communication norms, and adapting conflict resolution strategies to cultural expectations.

This study, by using real-world insights and academic research, aims to help and equip current and future leaders with tools they will need to lead multinational teams with confidence, empathy and effectiveness.

KEY WORDS: multinational teams/ cultural differences/ adaptive leadership/
culturally sensitive communication/ psychological safety

27 pages

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Multinational teams are an integral part of organizational success in today's global business world. The richness of these teams lies in their diversity, with each individual bringing different points of views, backgrounds, and talents to the table. However, the characteristics that make multinational teams such a valuable asset, also generate considerable challenges for leaders. For instance, dissimilarities in cultural norms, communication styles, work ethics, and expectations around leadership and collaboration can cause misunderstandings, conflicts, and inefficiencies. The management of such teams goes beyond conventional leadership abilities. They must skillfully navigate cultural differences, varying communication styles, and balancing expectations regarding leadership, decision-making, and teamwork. These challenges are not isolated events, rather they are highly part of the daily complexities of leading global teams. As a result, the ability to lead multinational teams has become a business skill necessary for all leaders around the world. This makes exploring the topic of “Leading multinational teams: strategies for success” an urgent and critical subject for today's leaders.

The growing significance of multinational teams in global organizations and the leadership challenges they present, motivating my research in this area. As for a personal perspective, my interest in this topic is driven by my academic background in General Management, my experiences in living and working in various cultural environments, as well as my inspiration for a global career. Being French and studying for my Master degree in Thailand, I had the opportunity and privilege to get a better understanding of intercultural interactions due to the multicultural environment of my academic studies. From my working experience with people from many different cultures, I got to know both sides of this environment and the great opportunities it brings. Through these experiences I have begun to develop a better knowledge of how leaders can navigate and gain from cultural diversity in teams and organizations. Another reason why I am passionate about exploring this topic closely corresponds with my career goals. I want to work for a multinational company in Asia, where cultural diversity is inherent to this workplace. Mastering cross-cultural leadership will equip me with better ability to lead teams with diverse cultural backgrounds and give me a competitive advantage in the international job market. Moreover, given my interest in strategic

management and the field of organizational development, this topic is indeed quite pertinent. Exploring this topic lets me connect my hobbies with my studies, as this is useful for both theoretical and tangible aspects of cross-cultural leadership. It is a subject I feel has great value to personal, as well as business evolution.

This paper explores the critical challenges leaders face in managing cultural diversity within multinational teams. It analyzes how communication strategies and adaptive leadership styles contribute to team success in cross-cultural contexts. The research asks the following research questions:

1. Which main challenges do leaders face in leading culturally diverse teams?
2. What are some key leadership strategies and practices that promote effective management of multinational teams to bridge the gap due to cultural differences?
3. What specific communication strategies do leaders use to handle cultural diversity and foster collaboration?

This research will focus on how to manage differences, communication and trust within multinational teams. To answer these questions, a qualitative methodology will be used. The study will collect insights from professionals engaged in multicultural settings using interviews. The study will include a total of 8 individuals consisting of 4 leaders managing teams that include members with different cultural backgrounds and 4 team members working under leaders from different cultural backgrounds. In addition, all participants will be from different companies to provide a diversity of perspectives across industries. It will give valuable information and insights from both leadership and team views to understand the issues they faced while working in multinational teams. It will also explore the effective ways to address these challenges, as well as the best practices for leaders working in culturally diversified teams.

Analysis of this study's findings will be a practical guide to current and future leaders seeking to gain insights into success strategies when leading across cultural differences. It covers the “gap” between theory and real-world practices, based on studies of literature and real-world examples. This paper aims to provide leaders with concrete and practical recommendations that help them to make the most of their multicultural work forces.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's globalized economy, multinational teams have emerged as a core strength for organizational success. Teams composed of individuals from diverse cultures, languages and backgrounds offer unique opportunities for organizations. But such diversity also brings leadership challenges, such as managing cultural differences, communication and trust among team members. Overcoming these challenges requires leaders to look beyond classic leadership techniques, and to master distinct competencies and approaches that can be used to leverage on the full benefits of multicultural teams. This literature review explores two themes in leading multinational teams, focusing on the core competencies, as well as ways to overcome the challenges in leading multinational teams. The literature review analyses results from major publications that provide theoretical and practical insights to improve understanding of effective management and leadership practices in multinational teams.

2.1 The key competencies to lead international teams

In a gradually more interconnected world, multinational teams are now critical for organizations seeking to benefit from diversity and worldwide cooperation. However, as Ang et al (2007) points out, managing such teams requires a unique skill set to effectively navigate the complexities of cultural diversity. Successful leaders in multinational teams need to master three main competencies, which are cultural intelligence, communication skills and trust-building and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

2.1.1 Cultural intelligence (CQ)

Cultural intelligence, also known as CQ, is an essential skill for leaders working with multicultural teams. That is, the capacity to interpret and adjust to the diverse cultural norms, values, and behaviors of individuals from different backgrounds (Earley & Ang, 2003). Such leaders with strong cultural intelligence can promote inclusivity and collaboration within their teams. They can transform cultural issues into opportunities for innovation and growth (Rockstuhl et al, 2011).

According to Hajro and Pudelko (2010), cultural intelligence enables leaders to decode the cultural signals and address the conflicts that may arise due to different cultural expectations. For example, an expatriate leader at a multinational technology company may struggle when Western team members, accustomed to flat hierarchies, have a difficult time understanding how to work with their Asian colleagues who have hierarchical values. By demonstrating cultural intelligence, the leader can explore and exploit these differences as well as encourage the creation of a climate in which all team members feel appreciated, and understood.

2.1.2 Communication skills

Sometimes effective communication skills emerge as the key for successfully managing multicultural teams. However, differences in language, communication and body language norms often complicate conversations and interactions within teams like these. (Henderson, 2020)

Language-related emotions, including anxiety and frustration, can interfere with collaboration in multinational teams (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015). Therefore, it is important for leaders to utilize tools such as paraphrasing, summarizing and repetition to help ensure that all members of the team understand correctly. Also, the use of meta-communications, where leaders discuss communications challenges openly and set expectations, has been identified as a key strategy for reducing misunderstandings. For example, at a multinational engineering company, leaders who were able to transition to structured communication protocols (weekly check-ins over video and summarized minutes of meetings) reported higher levels of team cohesion, productivity and job satisfaction.

Another research has shown that communication styles can differ across cultures (Aritz & Walker, 2014), such as the direct communication seen in American teams and the indirect communication in East Asian teams, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts within teams. Effective leaders can adjust their communication approach to align with the cultural expectations of their team. For example, leaders in East Asian contexts often tend to have a more indirect communication style in order to maintain harmony within the team, whereas leaders in Western contexts may prefer direct communication that gets to the point to maximize efficiency. Such cultural adaptation in communication enables leaders to show their understanding of culture context, creating a mutually respectful and understanding environment.

2.1.3 Trust-building and psychological safety

Trust is a key point of successful teams, and it is particularly important in multinational teams where cultural differences may increase misunderstandings and conflicts (Edmondson et Lei, 2014). Leaders need to actively create a sense of psychological safety so that team members can safely bring their ideas to the discussion, acknowledge mistakes and speak openly without threat of being censured or judged from what they can say. (Edmondson, 1999)

Psychological safety, introduced by Edmondson (1999), emphasizes its role in the emergence of better collaboration and innovation within teams, therefore, impacting the overall success of organizations. Leaders can help create psychological safety through an inclusive dialogue that embraces the contributions of each member. For example, in a global marketing team, a leader might actively ask for the opinions of less vocal team members, especially those from hierarchic-based cultures. This shows that leadership practices involving this technique help team members to feel a sense of engagement and belonging.

Hundschell et al. (2020, 2022) emphasize the importance of cultural gap-bridging behaviors in building trust within teams. Examples of such behaviors are mediate conflicts, integrate diverse perspectives, and facilitate communication across cultures. When leaders listen carefully to their team members' concerns and also work to resolve miscommunication, trust and loyalty within their teams become stronger. For example, a multinational pharmaceutical company team leader can take on the role of mediator in a conflict between team members from collectivist and individualist cultures to ensure that the conflict does not impact the team collaboration or productivity.

Finally, psychological safety is necessary to build trust between employees that in return will lead to better work engagement (Hajro and Pudenko, 2010). When team members feel safe to speak out, they have a greater chance to come up with out-of-the-box ideas and a better willingness to own their work. Leaders who prioritize trust-building and psychological safety develop their teams' potential, driving both individual and collective successes. (Szydło et al., 2022)

In the age of globalization, leading multinational teams comes with its own unique challenges. It is so required for leaders to understand the complexities that arise from cultural differences. Greater cultural intelligence skill leads to better interpretation and adaptation to cultural differences, whereas effective communication among the team creates better clarity and mutual understanding within leaders and team members (Ang et al., 2007; Henderson, 2020). Trust-building enhances the inclusivity within teams and provides a sense of

empowerment to its members. Combined, these competencies offer a solid foundation for leadership in multinational teams.

2.2 Addressing difficulties within multicultural teams

Managing global teams can be challenging due to cultural differences, communication issues, and differences in collaboration and leadership expectations (Rockstuhl et al., 2011). To create more collaborative and high-performing teams, leaders need to address two main challenges: managing cultural differences, and resolving conflicts. (Sogancilar and Ors, 2018)

2.2.1 Managing cultural differences

Cultural diversity within multinational teams may cause misunderstandings and follow-up problems when team members expect different things from teamwork, group authority and how to solve problems (Earley & Ang, 2003). This gap needs to be addressed by leaders in a way that promotes inclusion and productivity. (Tenzer and Pudelko, 2015)

Sogancilar & Ors (2018) emphasizes leaders being key role in identifying and addressing issues arising from cultural differences. For example, when teams include both, members who value individualistic autonomy (i.e., American culture) versus members who value collective decision-making (e.g., Japanese culture), leaders with global mindsets need to overcome these expectations-gap via clear communication that facilitates mutual understanding. Leaders can prevent potential conflicts by facilitating discussion about cultural norms, values and clearly defining team goals to foster team's cohesion.

Schneider & Romberg (2011) propose a systematic approach to reduce the gap between cultural differences using a performance alignment. They suggest that improving communication should come after teams have a shared understanding of performance expectations. For example, one German-Japanese team in a multinational organization saw regular conflicts. They resolved those conflicts by developing a performance framework that integrated both hierarchical and egalitarian cultural perspectives, enabling them to better work together.

In addition, Hajro and Pudelko (2010) emphasize the importance of cultural intermediaries, leaders who transfer company culture while respecting values, norms and practices of local cultures (Hajro & Pudelko, 2010). These are leaders that act as a bridge

between headquarters and subsidiaries, ensuring that corporate goals remain aligned while respecting local culture. This becomes especially helpful while dealing with geographically dispersed teams with different cultural backgrounds.

2.2.2 Conflict resolution

Henderson (2020) claims that conflict is an inevitable primary consequence of cultural diversity in multinational teams which can disrupt collaboration and performance if not addressed effectively. Leaders have to create contextually adaptable conflict resolution methods so that they can better resolve conflicts within their teams. (Aritz and Walker, 2014)

They study the influence on conflict resolution in multinational groups based on both leadership styles and cultural groups (Aritz & Walker, 2014). Directive leadership, commonly preferred in individualistic cultures, may disadvantage team members from collectivistic cultures, where group decision-making is favored. Leader who adopts a balanced approach, combining directive and cooperative styles, will better manage the conflicts that can arise from culture differences.

Hundschell et al. (2022) emphasize the value of bridging behaviors in resolving conflicts and bridging gaps. The leaders who mediate workplace conflicts by recognizing cultural differences and creating space for dialogue, develop trust and create a sense of team cohesion. For example, one leader in a global consultancy firm resolved a conflict among team members from lo-context (e.g. U.S.) and high-context culture (e.g. China) by clarifying expectations and demanding that everyone share what they felt for them to be heard.

For leaders of multinational teams, the difficulty of managing cultural differences, as well as the resolution of conflicts, are crucial (Rockstuhl et al., 2011). In this way, leaders who are able to address these challenges successfully, can turn these possible barriers into opportunities for working together and better collaborate (Tenzer and Pudelko, 2015). This can be achieved when leaders understand and keep cultural differences under control and when they use adaptive conflict resolution strategies to create greater cohesion within their teams (Szydło et al., 2022). These practices not only increase the productivity of teams within organizations, but also those organizations to better succeed in today's competitive globalized world. (Hajro and Pudelko, 2010)

The literature highlights that effective leadership of multinational teams involves developing cultural intelligence, trust and adaptable communication in order to succeed (Ang et al., 2007; Rockstuhl et al., 2011). In addition, leaders need to build a deep understanding of cultural differences and an adaptive leadership style in order to deal effectively in culturally

diverse contexts (Hajro & Pudelko, 2010; Sogancilar & Ors, 2018). In addition, establishing clear and culturally appropriate communication is another necessary skill to foster greater trust, psychological safety and team collaboration (Edmondson, 1999; Tenzer & Pudelko, 2015; Henderson, 2020). By adopting these approaches, leaders can leverage diversity as a competitive advantage that grows success (Szydło et al., 2022). These concepts will act as the theoretical foundation of this research, guiding the exploration of actionable and tangible strategies to successfully lead multinational teams.



CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study will employ a qualitative research method in order to understand the challenges that come with managing cultural diversity across multinational teams. The research will focus on managing cultural differences, effective communication, and trust-building, with primary data collected through interviews of individuals from diverse teams from two different organizations.

3.1 Research approach

The research privileged the use of a qualitative methodology as it allows a deeper exploration of real-life experiences and perceptions of both leaders and employees working in multinational teams. While quantitative methodology deals with numerical data, qualitative research offers contextual information on how leadership strategies are applied in practice in multinational teams.

In-depth interviews are one of the qualitative data collections that allow the use of open-ended questions, to gather deeper detailed experiences and opinions from participants. Bringing in a comprehensive view about the challenges and strategies when it comes to leading culturally diverse teams.

3.2 Selection of participants

To ensure a variety of perspectives, we are going to interview eight individuals working in multinational teams. The selected participant will have extensive experience of leading or working in teams with high cultural diversity. The sample will consist of:

- Four multinational team-leaders, each with 1.5+ years of experience in leading employees of different nationalities.
- Four employees working for leaders from a culture other than their own.

All participants will be from different teams, to ensure a broader and more representative understanding of leadership challenges across various team perspectives.

POSITION	GENDER	YEAR OF EXPERIENCE	NATIONALITY	CODE
CEO	M	12	UK	L1
English content writing manager	F	2	Thai	E1
Business development manager	M	8	UK	L2
Business development specialist	M	17	Iranian	E2
English content writing manager	F	2	Thai	L4
Account manager	F	2	Burmese	E4
Sales director	M	7	French	L5
Rental and sales consultant	F	1.5	Thai	E5

Table 3.1 List of the interviews

3.3 Criteria for selection

To add balance to this discussion, each of the four leaders interviewed was paired with one of the members of his or her own team. Pairing the participants enables capturing the leadership style and team member lived experience in the same cultural context.

Three of the four leaders work in different departments from the same organization, a national news and media company. They comprise business development, content writing, and head management. The other leader has a position within a real estate company.

All interviewees have worked in multinational teams for at least two years, which puts them in a good position to provide insights on managing cultural diversity in their teams. They were also people in my professional or personal network, which was helpful to contact and set up interviews.

Participants will be selected based on three criteria. First, their experiences in multinational teams (all participants are required to currently work in a multinational team). Second, for leaders, the four leaders need to lead team members that are from different cultures than theirs. Third, for team members, the four employees should be led by leaders with a different cultural background than their own.

3.4 Data collection methods

To answer the research questions, interviews will be conducted with eight participants. The interviews will explore four main points, the leadership strategies for managing cultural diversity, the challenges leaders face when managing multinational teams, how communication strategies impact team collaboration, and how adaptive leadership styles enhance team collaboration.

By asking open-ended questions, it will allow participants to share more real-life experiences as they are not restricted to a few and simple answers only. Follow up questions will also be asked to help encourage deeper insights, such as “Can you give me an example of how that impacts your team members?”, “How did you respond to that challenge faced by your employees?”, and “What was the effect on the overall team collaboration after implementation?”.

Interview questions for leaders	
1	Can you describe your experience leading a multinational team?
2	What are the biggest cultural challenges you have faced as a leader?
3	How do you adapt your leadership style when working with culturally diverse team members?
4	Can you share a specific example where cultural differences led to a misunderstanding or conflict? How did you handle it?
5	What communication strategies do you use to ensure clarity and understanding across different cultural backgrounds?
6	How do you foster trust and safety within your team?
7	Can you describe a time when understanding cultural differences helped you solve a leadership challenge?
8	What strategies have been most effective in overcoming cultural barriers within your team?
9	What advice would you give to leaders who are new to managing multinational teams?
10	What leadership competencies do you believe are essential for effectively managing a culturally diverse team?

Table 3.2 List of questions asked in the interviews with leaders

Interview questions for team members

1	What is your experience working in a multinational team?
2	Have you encountered any cultural misunderstandings within your team? How were they addressed?
3	How would you describe your leader's approach to managing cultural diversity?
4	Does your leader actively encourage trust-building? If so, how?
5	How does your leader handle communication differences between team members?
6	Have you ever felt excluded due to cultural differences? If so, what happened?
7	What could your leader do to improve how they manage a multinational team?
8	Do you feel your cultural background is valued in your team? Why or why not?
9	What leadership qualities do you find most effective in your company's multinational environment?
10	What recommendations would you give to leaders managing multinational teams?

Table 3.3 List of questions asked in the interviews with team members

3.5 Research framework

The research framework for this study is based on three key leadership skills necessary to successfully manage multinational teams: managing cultural differences, effective communication, and trust-building. Each of these competencies are highly interrelated, and they can play an important role in promoting better collaboration, inclusion, and leadership effectiveness within multicultural teams.

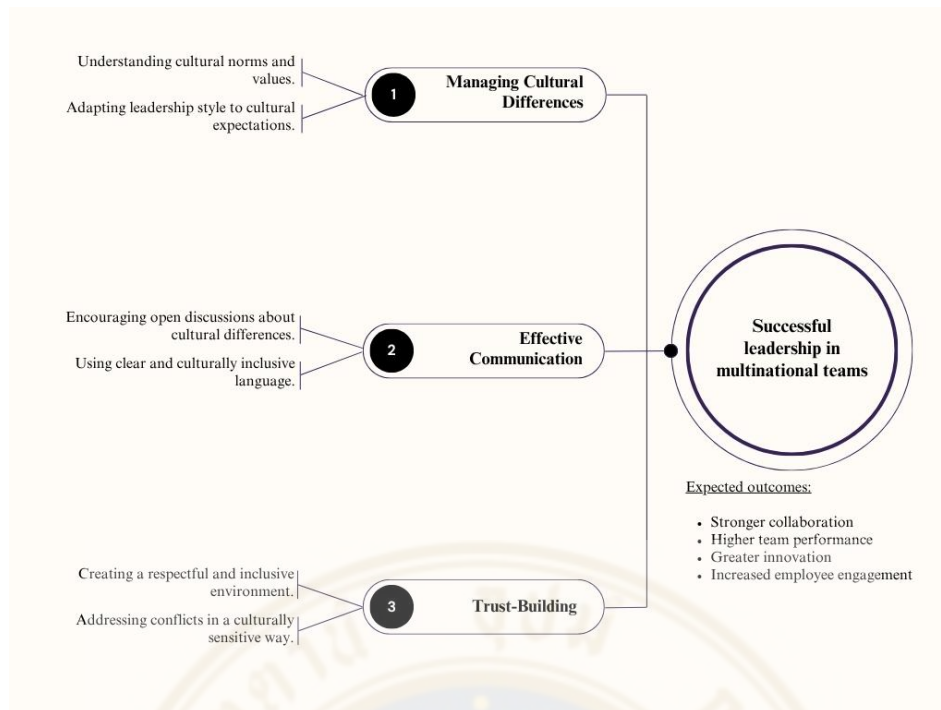


Figure 3.1: Research framework for leading multinational teams

First, managing cultural differences. To build an inclusive team environment and reduce cultural misunderstandings, leaders must cultivate their ability to lead different workstyles, expectations, and values. Second, effective communication. By ensuring that their messages are clear, more inclusive, and more culturally sensitive, leaders can generate more productive collaboration among team members, regardless of language barriers and diverse communication styles. Lastly, trust-building. Leaders must make sure to create a supportive environment where employees feel valued and respected, which will translate into stronger team cohesion and engagement.

Facilitating the use of these three competencies will allow leaders to turn cultural diversity into a strategic advantage, as well as improving the overall collaboration and performance of multinational teams. This framework is designed to guide the collection and analysis of data, making sure the results provide actionable insights that everyone working in global teams can use.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

Eight in-depth interviews were carried out, four with team leaders and four with team members. They all had, on average, 1 year of experience of working in multinational teams and came from news & media, and real estate sectors. Data were analyzed according to the research framework: managing cultural differences, communication strategies, and trust-building.

4.1 Cultural differences which impact team collaboration

This section responds to the research question 1: What are the main challenges leaders face in leading culturally diverse teams? The interviews revealed that both leaders and team members face several cultural differences that influence team collaboration. These differences can be grouped into four main themes: respect for hierarchy, communication and feedback styles, perceptions of time and urgency, and attitudes toward self-expression and initiative.

4.1.1 Respect for hierarchy

In some cultures, particularly Asian ones, team members show high levels of deference to authority, and many leaders said this was one of the major obstacles they faced. A French leader working in Thailand, explained that his team members would frequently nod along during meetings, but they would later on tell colleagues that they had concerns or misunderstood the task. He said, “They wouldn't tell me directly if they disagreed. I had to learn to read between the lines.” One leader also reflected, “My European staff would challenge decisions directly, in my team, my Thai staff would never say no, even if they disagreed. I had to learn how to read between the lines” (L). These remarks illustrate the complexity of indirect disagreement and the necessity for leaders to actively read these non-verbal cues or silence, as potential signs of disagreement. A British CEO, also observed that some employees would hesitate to challenge ideas openly due to cultural norms around seniority. This preference for

indirect disagreement limits opens dialogue which in result affects the collaboration within teams.

Employees also confirmed this dynamic. A Thai team member said that she sometimes felt uncomfortable giving her opinions in meetings, especially when her supervisor was present. Another employee explained, “I think my manager thought I wasn't interested in the discussion because I didn't talk during meetings. But in my culture, it's respectful to listen first and speak when the person in charge of the meeting invites us to” (E). This shows a major difference in meeting culture. What might be seen as passivity by some leaders is actually, for others, a culturally respectful behavior.

4.1.2 Communication and feedback styles

One of the most frequent differences mentioned by leaders and team members was how feedback is delivered and received. A leader highlighted that, “What I thought was constructive feedback was taken as harsh” (L1), referring to a situation in which a British team member's direct style offended a Thai colleague. Similarly, another leader, from the UK as well, recognized that he needed to soften his tone when working with Asian colleagues (L5). This shows how direct feedback, while wanted as helpful, can be perceived as criticism or rudeness in more indirect cultures.

Team members also expressed similar views. One shared, “My manager is British and very direct. At first, I thought he was angry, upset with me every day. But later, I understood that it was just his way of talking” (E5). This illustrates how unfamiliar communication styles can harness trust and morale at first, until clarified through continued interaction. Another interviewee described a misunderstanding over digital communication: “One day, I sent a message on my team group chat that said ‘Please do this ASAP.’ My Japanese colleague thought I was angry and a little impolite. I had to apologize and say that it's just the way I talk” (E1). This example highlights how something seen as urgency in Western contexts may come across as rude in more relationship-based cultures, especially when delivered without context.

4.1.3 Perceptions of time and urgency

Several leaders pointed out that different cultural perceptions of time and deadlines could disrupt team alignment. A leader said that he has been frustrated early in his role by what he saw as a lack of urgency from team members (L2). Another leader also noted that while his European colleagues preferred fast execution, his Thai team members were more concerned

with harmony and meeting expectations, which sometimes made results take longer to achieve (L5). From the followers' perspective, these time-related expectations were not necessarily viewed as problematic but rather as a difference in rhythm. An employee working in Business Development, explained that, "We get the job done, but maybe not as fast as he's used to" (E2). These reflections suggest that differing understandings of time can lead to tension, especially if deadlines are viewed as fluid by some and fixed by others.

4.1.4 Self-expression and initiative

A final emerging theme relates to how initiative is both shown and acknowledged. Some leaders such as a French and a Thai-Chinese manager, both said that some team members prefer to contribute quietly rather than sharing their ideas in meetings. The Thai-Chinese leader shared that she had a Filipino colleague who often stayed silent during discussions but provided excellent written suggestions afterwards (L4). She adapted by allowing team members to contribute before and after meetings. A CEO said, "Some people don't speak up in a group, not because they don't care, but because culturally it's not their style" (L1).

Team members also described how cultural norms influenced their level of comfort in participating. One recalled, "When I first joined my current team, during the first meeting my manager told us 'Feel free to jump in at any time', but I didn't really get it when it was okay. So, for the first month I just stayed quiet. Later on, my manager discussed it with me and I explained to him the situation and we sorted everything out" (E4). This highlights that leaders need to follow up and clarify expectations because what may be clear to you isn't going to be clear to someone who is used to different cultural conditioning. Even with permission, people may not immediately engage in the discussion. Another employee who studied in an international school all her life shared, "One day, during a presentation, I asked a lot of questions. I later found out some team members thought I was challenging the speaker and others thought I just wanted to show up. But for me, if you have a question, you ask. That's how I show my interest" (E1). This illustrates how behaviors meant to signal interest and engagement can be misinterpreted/misread across cultures.

In conclusion, while the experiences of each interviewee varied, the interviews showed that cultural differences shape how authority is perceived, how communication is done, how time is valued, and how participation is expressed. Both leaders and team members experience these differences, but leaders bear the additional responsibility of managing them to make sure that collaboration remains effective within teams.

4.2 Leadership strategies

This section aims to respond to the research question 2: What are some key leadership strategies and practices that promote effective management of multinational teams to bridge the gap due to cultural differences? The interviews indicated that the leaders employ a variety of strategies to navigate cultural differences and keep an effective team collaboration. These strategies included adapting leadership style, building psychological safety, clarifying expectations, and mediating cultural misunderstandings.

4.2.1 Adaptive leadership: adjusting styles to cultural norms

One of the prominent strategies was the adaptation of leadership style to suit the cultural backgrounds of team members. Leaders have consistently avoided a one-size-fits-all approach. A French sales director based in Thailand explained that this way of managing varied according to who he was speaking to: “With some people, I go straight to the point. Others need more time, more context. I adjust depending on how they are used to working” (L5). Similarly, a British CEO, spoke about how he adapted his communication style to make sure his Thai team members felt respected and involved in decision making, especially given their more reserved approach to authority and feedback.

4.2.2 Building psychological safety across cultural differences

A majority of the leaders placed a strong emphasis on creating psychological safety, a team climate where people feel free and comfortable to express themselves without fear of embarrassment or judgment. One CEO shared how he made time for one-on-one conversations with employees in various departments during his visits to Thailand. He said, “I want them to feel like they can come to me, even if I'm not always here in person” (L1). A team leader in content management also described how she and her CEO co-developed more inclusive feedback practices after a Thai staff member withdrew from discussions because of harsh comments from one of his colleagues. This demonstrated a proactive leadership style that aimed to reshape communication norms to be more culturally inclusive. One team took this initiative even further and created shared guidelines: “Internally in my team, we worked on a ‘communication culture book’. It is like a guide on how we lie to give and receive feedback. It helped a lot; everyone was happy with the result” (E4). This strategy is a perfect example of

how collaboratively developed norms can help reduce cultural misunderstandings, reduce conflicts, and clarify expectations.

4.2.3 Setting clear objectives and shared goals

Another important strategy was to set clear and shared objectives, especially to overcome differences in understanding and perceptions of time and accountability. A CEO implemented Google's OKR (Objectives and Key Results) framework across departments. He explained: "We set goals like 'increasing time on page from 40 seconds to one minute', everyone understands this target" (L1). By providing common goals, this CEO aligned team members from different cultural backgrounds around shared measurable outcomes.

4.2.4 Acting as cultural mediators

Leaders also frequently acted as cultural mediators. An English Content Writing Manager recalled a story where a British editor gave straightforward feedback to one of his Thai colleagues, which caused this colleague to lose confidence in his ability to do his work (L5). This leader facilitated a conversation between both where all perspectives were acknowledged and team norms were redefined. A British leader in business development, explained that whenever a cultural conflict arises, his role was not to take sides but to explain the motivations behind each persons' behaviors: "Sometimes I had to tell one team member, 'He's not being rude, that's just how he communicates', and help the other person adjust" (L2).

These examples illustrate that leading across deep cultural or national differences requires emotional and cultural intelligence, as well as the ability to pick up subtle cues, and a willingness to continuously learn and adapt. Leaders were not simply managing projects or their teams, but they were actively shaping the environment in which collaboration could happen.

4.3 Communication strategies

This section responds to research question 3: What specific communication strategies do leaders use to handle cultural diversity and foster collaboration? The interviews showed that communicating within multinational teams is not just about language skills. It is about being clear, sensitive to people's cultural norms, it is also about flexibility in format, and proactive efforts to avoid misunderstandings. Both leaders and team members highlighted how

effective communication plays a crucial role in shaping team dynamics and maintaining cohesion.

4.3.1 Simplifying language and avoiding cultural idioms

One common strategy used by leaders was using simplified language and avoiding culturally specific expressions. A CEO explained that he tends to avoid idioms or informal phrases that may not translate clearly for non-native speakers: “I try to stay away from slang or expressions that could confuse non-native speakers” (L1). By doing so, he ensures that everyone on the team can fully understand important messages, no matter what their first language might be.

4.3.2 Reinforcing oral communication with written confirmation

In addition, besides simplifying language, leaders also reinforced spoken communication with written confirmation. One French director noted that he always follows up verbal conversations with written messages: “Even if we agree on something in person, I always send a summary by email. That way, there is no confusion later” (L5). This gives team members the chance to review and process information at their own pace, which helps prevent miscommunication.

4.3.3 Adapting communication formats to individual comfort

Another commonly used strategy was to adjust communication formats to suit individual comfort levels. A Thai-Chinese leader noted that some of her colleagues were reluctant to speak their point of view in meetings. She adapted by giving them opportunities to contribute outside of oral discussions: “Some of our team members are shy in meetings, so I ask them to send their thoughts before or after in writing” (L4). By doing so, it will help to reach a greater participation level from all the members of the team. This demonstrates how tailoring communication channels to individual preferences helps ensure inclusivity in the team. One employee also highlighted the role of technology: “When we do Zoom meetings, I feel more comfortable speaking up than I would do during in-person meetings. It's scary” (E4). This shows how virtual environments can sometimes lower the barrier for participation in cultures that value modesty or where public speaking is intimidating.

4.3.4 Active clarification to confirm understanding

Leaders also worked to ensure understanding through active clarification. One leader explained his strategy to confirm the comprehension of team members: “Instead of just asking if they understand, I ask them to tell me what they think the next steps are” (L2). This method helps avoid false affirmations, caused by politeness or fear of being seen as incompetent, which are common issues in some high-context cultures.

4.3.5 Importance of tones and emotional interpretation

Team members also talked about the importance of tone and emotional awareness in communication. A Thai employee, working in real estate, said that how something is said, means often as much as what is said. “If someone sounds too direct, it can be hurtful even if they didn't mean it badly” (E5). Her reflection highlights that the perception of tone and the emotional response that goes with it can vary, it is open to the interpretation of the listener, which influences how messages are received and responded to.

In summary, effective communication in multinational teams can be improved by combining clear language, empathy, the use of multiple formats, and an attention to cultural nuances. These strategies helped team members from different backgrounds to better collaborate and also to feel more included in discussions.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of the key findings

The analysis from chapter 4 shows that leading multinational teams required to navigate through various cultural differences that can affect collaboration, communication, and trust. Despite having training in these areas, leaders said that they struggled with differences in team members' attitudes towards hierarchy, communication styles, time orientation, and self-expression. These results corroborate existing literature regarding cross-cultural management, including the influence of power distance and individualism, collectivism (Hofstede, 1980) and the need for cultural intelligence (Ang et al., 2007).

In response to these challenges, leaders used a variety of adaptive strategies. These included adjusting their communication style based on the preferences of team members, creating psychological safe environments where feedback could be shared, and acting as mediators in situations where cultural misunderstanding occurs. These actions align with those outlined by Edmondson's (1999) and Rockstuhl et al. (2011) focusing on the need for inclusive leadership and emotional intelligence in multinational teams.

Clear and culturally sensitive communication emerged as a crucial facilitator for collaboration. Both leaders and team members described the importance of tone, clarity, and message format. Paraphrasing, written follow-ups, and flexible meeting formats were used to make sure that everyone was included and that they all understood. These findings align with Tenzer and Pudenko's (2015) research on language and communication management within multinational teams.

Together, the findings highlight the importance and the need for cultural sensitivity, adaptive leadership, and inclusive communication as key components of successful multinational teams' management. These insights form the basis for the practical recommendations detailed in the following section.

5.2 Recommendations for the leaders and organizations

These evidence-based recommendations are based on the key findings previously presented, and aim to help and support leaders and organizations to effectively engage and lead multicultural teams in today's globalized work environment.

5.2.1 Invest in cultural intelligence training

Structured and practical cultural intelligence training for team leaders and managers should be implemented by organizations. Such training should include workshops, immersive real-life situations and case studies focused on culture differences in authority, communication, time and feedback. One British leader reflected on how his direct tone got read as aggression by Thai team members (L). Training leaders on the cultural norms of their diverse colleagues may help with these misunderstandings (Rockstuhl et al., 2011).

5.2.2 Develop cultural mentoring programs

Develop internal mentoring programs with expatriate or foreign leaders paired with local team members to guide them through cultural adaptation. For example, a Thai employee who has been working in a multinational team for over 1 year said her being quiet in meetings was interpreted as her not being engaged, even though she was trying to be respectful. Such misunderstandings could be clarified before they negatively impact team cohesion by having a cultural mentor.

5.2.3 Set clear and inclusive communication norms

To prevent any miscommunication, it is important that teams develop shared useful communication guidelines. This covers everything from how to set the tone for emails, the manner in which feedback is delivered and expected behaviors in meetings. One team developed a “communication culture book”, which helped clarify expectations and fostered a more respectful environment within their team. To ensure comprehension across cultures, leaders should also frequently paraphrase and summarize the discussions.

5.2.4 Demonstrate human-centered leadership

Emotional connection and psychological safety should be one of the leaders' main priorities. This includes conducting consistent 1:1 meeting, being transparent about decisions and mistakes, and inviting quieter members to participate in ways that suit them. A leader

described how allowing a team to submit written feedback prior to meetings accelerated the discussion of useful perspectives (L4). These practices build trust and reduce fear of speaking up, especially in high-context cultures.

5.2.5 Use anonymous feedback channels

Leaders should implement anonymous feedback tools to identify underlying issues or concerns. In multiple interviews, team members described cultural norms that discouraged direct criticism. Asking for anonymous forms, online surveys, or a digital suggestion box provide individuals with a safe channel, allowing for honest feedback without fear of offending or disrespecting those authorities.

5.2.6 Adapt conflict resolution styles

While dealing with conflict resolution, you must consider the cultural context. Leaders should not apply a one-size-fits-all approach, but they should adapt their leadership style when the conflict involves issues between individualistic vs. collectivistic mindset or direct vs. indirect communication norms. One leader explained how he had to balance a misunderstanding between British and Thai staff by interpreting the intent of both sides, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity (L). In complex situations, leaders may consider involving mediators with culturally adaptive skills to facilitate the discussion and resolve the conflict.

5.3 Conclusion

This thematic paper aimed to investigate the challenges and strategies associated with leading multinational teams, considering the role of cultural differences, effective communication, and trust-building in the process. Using an in-depth qualitative study approach, based on interviews with leaders and team members across two industries, real estate and news & media, the research shows that cultural diversity creates opportunities and challenges for collaboration. The data revealed some key themes, including differences in attitudes towards hierarchy, feedback style and the views of time and initiative. These results were consistent with the majority of previous studies, especially the works of Hofstede (1980), Ang et al. (2007), and Edmondson (1999), while also offering current, practical insights from real workplace experiences.

The research showed that the best leaders in a multinational environment do not apply a unique-approach solution. Instead, they show adaptability as leaders, emotional and cultural intelligence and a deep commitment to inclusive communication practices. Interview responses demonstrated how, for example, approaches including setting clear objectives (the OKR way), allowing flexibility in communication formats or putting together team-specific guidelines (communication culture book), significantly helped teams align and work together across cultural differences. In today's multicultural work environment, these insights are crucial since leaders who can navigate across cultures are in greater demand than ever.

But as with all research, this study has its limits. Firstly, the number of participants in the sample was small (only 8), so the findings are not generalizable. Moreover, the majority of people interviewed were from the same company, which could also have introduced some cultural or organizational bias. Also, this study was based on self-reported data from interviews, which could suffer from individual perceptions. Future research may be able to use mixed-methods approaches, such as qualitative interviews combined with direct field observations, large sample sizes, or comparisons between industries.

In today's multicultural work environment, an interesting direction for future research would be to explore how an individual's background, personality traits, and past exposure to multicultural environments influence an individual's experience within multinational teams. Even within the same leadership, some interviewees described their leader as accessible and inclusive, while others found it hard to get involved. It illustrates how leadership is not only about your actions, but also how people react to what you do. Exploring such intra-team differences more deeply might allow organizations to enhance leadership development initiatives and develop approaches that offer more targeted interventions at both team and personal levels. It could help to better understand how personal and cultural factors influence team members' expectations, engagement, and overall collaboration in multicultural settings.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive leadership, inclusive communication, and trust-building practices for successful multinational team management. It is hoped that these insights will serve as a valuable resource for current and future leaders navigating the complexities of global teams.

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