

# Tensions in Multicultural Teams



## Rationale:

Research hints to a “*diversity paradox*” (cf. Garcia-Prieto, Bellard and Schneider, 2003) when it comes to multicultural teams. While their heterogeneity promises higher quality decisions and greater creativity, they are also prone to experience greater tensions and conflicts. People with different cultural backgrounds perceive, shape, and attempt to handle issues and events differently. This can bring about both, constructive and destructive conflicts. Therefore, although conflict can enhance team performance and outcomes, it may also be disruptive to team interaction. Culture also has a major impact on how individuals perceive a conflict and how they respond to it. Based on a virtual team experience, this activity illustrates the problems and sources of conflict in multicultural teams.

## Learning outcomes:

It is important to become aware of the interaction processes and dynamics at work when working in multicultural teams in order to avoid considering the “other” as the sole cause of misunderstandings. Participants become aware that it is frequently one’s own (mis)interpretation and evaluation of situations that may bring about tension and conflict as well as a lack of understanding of other people’s situation.

## Time:

90 – 110 minutes

## Participants:

min: 10      max: 30

## Group composition:

- Monocultural
- Multicultural

## Level:

- A
- B

## Target groups:

- Undergraduate students
- Recent graduates
- Young professionals
- Experienced mid-career professionals from multiple disciplinary areas

My  
Biography

Ethnography

Intercultural  
Interaction

Communicative  
Interaction

Diversity  
Management

Intercultural  
Responsibility

Emotional  
Management

Working  
in  
MCTs

- Foreign language / culture educators and trainers
- Human resource managers

**Materials required:**

- Copies of the worksheets for each participant

**Accompanying documents:**

- Worksheets (Parts 1, 2 and 3)

**Mode of learning:**

- Group-study
- Self-study

**Procedure:**

1. This activity consists of three parts. Start it by forming small multicultural groups of 4 – 6 participants.
2. Hand out the worksheet with the statements to each participant and have them read through the collection of statements taken from the first reflective essay.
3. Have participants answer and discuss the questions in their small groups. Walk around and assist them with any questions. Sum up the most interesting findings and points raised by participants in class.
4. Continue with the statements taken from the second reflective essays. Again, ask participants to discuss the attached questions. Allow enough time to rethink why things may have developed as they have, and what could be done in order to get the team back on track.
5. Then have participants read through the statements taken from the third and last reflective essay. Again, have them discuss the questions and summarise findings in class.
6. Before continuing with Part II, elicit opinions of participants on the overall processes and behaviours observed in the multicultural team. Then have participants carry out the evaluation of individual team members. Ask participants whether there were different perceptions among them with regard to the individuals' performance. Also, compare the evaluations in class, identify any differences, and ask participants to provide possible reasons for them.
7. When starting Part III, briefly introduce the three types of conflict. Also, ask participants to come up with concrete examples for each in order to make sure that they are aware of the differences. Then have them fill in the table on the worksheet. Depending on the time available, you may want participants to fill in the table individually first before sharing their findings in their group. Alternatively, you can start this whole activity by highlighting the different types of conflict, and then have participants use the table already for the initial analysis of statements. This saves time and avoids repetition.

8. You may ask participants to write a reflective essay on the topic of this activity, where they can again reflect on the issues identified and their consequences for team work, as well as add personal experiences

### Guidelines:

This activity draws on reflective essays written by students in Austria and the United States while working on a virtual multicultural team project. The original essays were at least one page each. However, for the purpose of this activity, only the most relevant parts were taken out. Students wrote the reflective essays at three different points in time. This allows participants to reconstruct team processes and events, thereby creating a better understanding. If desired, one can combine this activity with Tuckman's Cycle of Team Development (1965). The following provides some more guidance regarding research and study findings that are helpful in carrying out this activity.

In comparison to geographically distributed teams, co-located teams are better able to develop closer and more positive relationships, not least because of the possibility for spontaneous interaction and more frequent communication. In fact, studies show that the strengthened social ties are beneficial for mutual trust development and enhance team performance. Team dynamics are more complex in geographically dispersed teams and characterised by a number of specific challenges. The following provides a list of challenges that participants are likely to identify when reading through the statements:

- other people's attitudes and behaviours
- different schedules and priorities
- language
- difficulty of clarifying and discussing emerging issues as they come up because of different time zones
- a lack of mutual awareness of team members and the context within which they are working and operating
- attributions: more frequent perceptions of a lack of motivation and / or inability
- communication frequency
- communication technology including the inability to transmit nonverbal cues
- less socialisation between team members in case of geographic dispersion

The questions following each segment should be discussed in small groups. Make sure that individuals put themselves into the shoes of the individuals reporting on their team experience. This allows participants to talk about the feelings and emotions experienced by the authors of the reflective essays, thereby providing a more immediate insight into the processes at work.

If you want to go deeper into the topic of conflicts in multicultural teams, please revert to the sources cited under "references". You may also assign them as required readings to participants, either in preparation or as a follow-

up to this activity. You may also follow up this activity with the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory by Hammer (2005). It is recommended to have individuals fill in the inventory and then compare the results in small groups. They should then think about the implications of the similarities and differences for multicultural teams and the resolution of conflict within them

#### References:

Appelbaum, S.H., Shapiro, B. and Elbaz, D. (1998). "The Management of Multicultural Group Conflict." *Team Performance Management*, Vol. 4, No. 5, pp. 211 - 234.

Garcia-Prieto, P., Bellard, E. and Schneider S.C. (2003). "Experiencing Diversity, Conflict and Emotions in Teams." *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, Vol. 52, No. 3, pp. 413 - 440.

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Hinds, P. J. and Bailey, D. E. (2003). "Out of Sight, Out of Sync: Understanding Conflict in Distributed Teams." *Organization Science*, Vol. 14, No. 6, pp. 615 - 632.

Miyahara, A., Kim, M.S., Shin, H.C. and Yoon, K. (1998). "Conflict Resolution Styles among Collectivist Cultures: A Comparison between Japanese and Koreans." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp 505 - 525.

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# Worksheet: Tensions in Multicultural Teams



## PART I

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This activity is based on reflective essays written by a student group taking part in a course on “Working in Multicultural Teams”. The set-up of the course is such that students from an Austrian university and a US-American university work together on a virtual team project for the duration of three months. They are provided with theoretical and empirical research on the topic of working in multicultural teams, and participate in activities that illustrate and prepare them for specific issues frequently encountered in multicultural team work. The Austrian sub-teams are composed of Austrians and exchange students, the US sub-teams usually encompass US nationals. The project consists of a number of assignments due in the course of and at the end of the three months. A video conference is held twice during this period in order to facilitate coordination between the student teams as well as to familiarise students with this communication technology. Students have to hand in reflective essays at three different points in time during the term. The following statements are original reflections of the individual team members and are indicative of the difficulties and conflicts evolving in virtual multicultural teamwork. Similar situations may also occur in business settings. For reasons of anonymity, the names of the six team members have been changed.

Names / Nationalities of team members  
based in

- | <u>Austria</u> | <u>US</u>     |
|----------------|---------------|
| - Anton (A)    | - John (US)   |
| - Jiri (CZ)    | - Ashley (US) |
| - Carmen (E)   | - Jenny (US)  |

## Reflective Essays No. 1

### *Anton*

"My first impression of my team [in Austria] was quite good as my teammates seemed to have a friendly and open attitude towards me. ... We got to know to each other during class and also during our "social meeting" which was a good idea to organise. I think that we are able to do good work together because we already built up trust within our group."

"Another difficulty for our first assignment is the Easter break in which my local team members travelled back to their home countries, so communication is as difficult as with our Cincinnati members."

"As my team members can communicate in English as well as in German possible communication problems are not likely to arise."

### *Jiri*

The deadline was due on April 12. ... There was no communication till April 12. We started the emailing on the April 12 and till now it is working.

I think big disadvantage is that here in Austria we have got holiday. We are not sitting by the computer every day. Some of us did not have internet connection like I have had till yesterday.

### *John*

There are obviously two components to the make-up of my virtual team: my teammates from Cincinnati and my teammates from Austria.

Before this class I was already familiar and friends with Ashley. We are in the Honours-PLUS program together and I am already aware of her capabilities. Jenny and I have placed our trust in Ashley as our team leader from our past positive experiences we have had with her.

I have worked in virtual teams before during my co-ops at Credit Suisse in London and New York City. The knowledge that I gained from working in virtual teams while on co-op is priceless and I hope that I am able to share some of my expertise with my teammates.

During our video conference with Austria we experienced a bad connection which made it nearly impossible to communicate with our counterparts in Austria. Since then we have only used e-mail to communicate with each other.

Because the Austrian students are on holiday there has been a very light volume of communication between the team members in Cincinnati and those in Austria. I believe that the volume of communication will pick up dramatically when the Austrian students return to school from holiday and the case deadline approaches.

We have been briefed in previous classes of these cultural differences and both Ashley and I have experienced these rifts in cultural norms firsthand. If any problems arise due to cultural differences I believe that we will be able to immediately diffuse the situation.

*Ashley*

In the email, I briefly introduced myself, and encouraged the rest of the group members to reply introducing themselves, as well. The replies varied.

Within 24 hours, I received a reply from Anton, my teammate from Austria. ... I asked Carmen and Jiri if they received my email. They both said they did receive my email, and responded back. However, I did not receive their email. I am not sure what to expect from Carmen and Jiri, because I've not spoken with them.

Over a week later, I received an email from John, a UC teammate. John is an ideal teammate; he is extremely knowledgeable about international affairs, and goes above and beyond in his school work.

In your small groups, discuss the following questions and share the results in class.

1. What has happened so far?
2. What is your impression of this team?
3. Can you see any problems emerging in this team? What may cause these problems?
4. If you were the designated team leader of this team, how would you proceed?
5. Can you identify any differences in perceptions of individual team members and expectations? What may be the consequences for the team?



## Reflective Essays No. 2

### *Anton*

I have the feeling that our communication finally broke down. Not within our local "Linz-group" but with the Americans. We sent some work we had agreed on last week and I have not received any response from them. Maybe something went wrong with the e-mail transit. I am quite frustrated at the moment.

I think that Carmen, Jiri and I should get together this weekend and get some research done. I hope that we can decide on an appointment in the next couple of days, but unfortunately Jiri is at home in The Czech Republic.

I would have expected the Americans to correct some of our mistakes. The grammatical and "using the wrong word" mistakes were still in the paper and I think that they have not even read our parts. Therefore we should improve our communication and ask them read over our work again.

I wonder what the Cincinnati group thinks about us and why our communication is so slow. Maybe they have a lot of work at the moment.

### *Jiri*

I also experienced some problems with my email address. I was very surprised when I received an email from Ashley which informed me, that she is still waiting for an answer (not only from me) and reactions to her proposal though I send it to her.

We also arranged a next telephone conference view Skype which will be held on next Friday. ... But then problems started. The Americans didn't replay at all. They didn't send to us their Skype names and suggestions to our tasks. On Friday there was no phone conference, no discussion about our tasks. To be able to do the oral presentation of our project on Monday, we had to do a part of the task the Americans were supposed to do. Worst of all is that we didn't receive for a period of almost two weeks any email from our American team members. I really wonder what happened.

### *Carmen*

There is only one point that we, the Austrian team, have seen as a mistake: no one has read the complete text. The Americans have the responsibility for revising the English language aspects of the paper.



We have forgotten to talk about that in the videoconference, so we should say it by mail and we have to select very carefully which words we are going to use.

Following with the videoconference, I have to admit that it was not too much productive. The American team sent us one structure to follow for resolving the case that was given to us. I thought that it was not very good because nothing new appeared there, but everyone, I mean, in Austrian team, thought that was better than the one that we suggested. I didn't agree, but I was the one that had that point of view and I decided to cede.

We distributed just a few tasks from the whole project. I don't know why but it was like that. After the videoconference we talked a little bit more about the meeting and the future work and we three agreed in what little had been the tasks distribution.

By this day, we have finished our first tasks but we haven't gone on the project and not even talk about it. The reason for that is clear: the exam. We have been so concentrated in it that we have forgotten somehow the paper.

I would like to take more responsibility inside the team because I think that I can contribute profitably in it but I have some limitations with the language. I feel sometimes that people don't understand the idea that I won't to communicate. It is very frustrating for me. I can build a sentence, but the meaning that they understand is not the one that I want to communicate, so I have to give up with it.

*John*

... my first impressions and expectations had changed rather dramatically based on my experience thus far.

First, my team thought it would be a good idea to designate a team leader from both the University of Cincinnati and from JKU. Both team leaders would be responsible for compiling the work from their domestic teammates and then communicate that material to the other team leader. We designated Ashley as our domestic team leader and she has done a good job with communicating with our Austrian counterparts, setting up team meetings, keeping everyone on task, and leading us towards a final product. However, after receiving a grade equivalent to a 'C' on the Leo Burnett case it has come to my attention that this process is obviously not the best way to approach our virtual team cases. Jenny and I are going to have to take a more hands on approach and communicate with our Austrian counterparts as well. There needs to be more discussion between Ashley, Jenny, and I at home and with each individual in Austria in order for our team to arrive to the best possible solution for our final team project.

Also, I blame myself for the poor grade that our group received on the Leo Burnett case because I did not take the time to review the final product before we turned it in.

I initially believed that this classroom experience with virtual teams would help me fine tune my virtual team skills. So far this has not been the case because of my lack of involvement in communicating with my Austrian counterparts.

However, I have yet to establish friendships or personal trust with my Austrian teammates. I need to immediately change this so I can work more efficiently with them and leave them with a positive view of the University of Cincinnati. Besides learning about virtual teams and completing work worthy of a good grade I still have hope that after this class has ended my three European teammates will spread the word about the talent, potential, and calibre of business students at the University of Cincinnati.

*Jenny*

Wow, I'm shocked. I have many different expectations now than I had when the class first started.

It's really hard to communicate efficiently with everyone in a group from America; it's a million times harder to communicate with people from a country across the world with a six hour time difference.

For us American students, it's our last quarter and we have so many things that need to be done in order to graduate and I know that I'm guilty of not checking my emails and not responding as quickly as I can because I have so many other things going on with my capstone classes and working 6 days a week.

1. How would you evaluate the team and its work so far?
2. Which areas can you identify where the team has already experienced problems? In your opinion, what are the main factors and reasons for this?
3. Which critical incidents can you identify?
4. What are the implications of all this for the team's performance?
5. What are your suggestions for improving the situation of the team?

### Reflective Essays No. 3

#### *Anton*

Ashley MSNed me and I could talk to her for quite a while (for the first time). This is very fortunate because my conversation with her unveiled some for me unbelievable things. As she is the only team member from America who answered on our emails I asked her what had happened to the other two members. She answered that they had absolutely nothing to do with our group project and had never sent her anything. For me, this explains a lot. Now I know why she is late on our work and she also apologized for this. I would have rather found out weeks ago than now that she is the only one doing something.

My conversation with Ashley put new light on our problems. In my second personal reflection I wrote that the communication finally had broken down and now I know why. I will apologize to Ashley because I was quite unfriendly to her in one of my emails I sent her.

I also realised that communication is the most important factor for a project with international virtual teams – when it works you do good at your tasks and if not – you fail and you don't even know why.

#### *Jiri*

In the beginning [of the team work] there was much more enthusiasm to work together but this enthusiasm was slowly diminishing.

Another problem which occurred in our email communication was the speed in responding the emails. It happened quite often, that somebody received an email and although there was some question which should be answered, he didn't respond. It didn't evocate a good feeling when you received a confirmation that an email was displayed on his/her computer but after it there was no reaction.

Finally, after the crash of communications with the Americans, there was no discussion among the two teams. Every body just submit his/her part and Ashley put it finally together.

#### *Carmen*

Unfortunately, the last reflective essay is going to be the most disappointing one. I will start with my reflection from the days before to our presentation.

We have arranged a meeting by mail for preparing the presentation. In that meeting only were Anton and me because Jiri had one course at the same time. Before doing anything we already had a



problem: American people hadn't sent us anything about their part and we needed it. We tried to get in contact with them by mail and also by phone, but we didn't get any answer. We structured our presentation and had to begin searching the information that the Americans should have sent us. We finished the meeting with all the information ready to be shaped. We said that we would meet again the next day from 9 am until the afternoon. Jiri was there when we decide that but the following day he didn't appear until Anton had called him. He said that he haven't realise about the meeting time. For that time we had, not only the presentation, but also a big part of the paper done.

The presentation was quite good. We were a little bit nervous, but we have worked very much on it –Anton and I- and I think that it reminded clear. As soon as I went on the work I found it more interesting and perhaps it will help me in the future.

After that we received an e-mail from USA telling us that they had technical problems and because of that, they haven't received the e-mails. I know that the mistrust is very bad in a working group but I must hesitate about those technical problems. Perhaps one mail is possible to get lost, but we sent them lots of them and even we called the by phone. We were very disappointed with the American part of the group but the worst hadn't appeared yet.

The last week I sent an e-mail to everybody regarding the death line for our paper. I received a replay from the Austrian group members but nothing from the USA. They have the work that we did and now there was their turn for going on the paper. Although our part was done, I thought that perhaps they will need help and that some parts of the paper would be necessary to be commented. The days moved forward and I haven't received any news from the American part of the team. Anton was also worried and we talked by phone about this point two days ago. I sent another mail regarding that our death line was almost here and that we needed to send the paper. Ashley replied me that they were working on it and that she would send me the work as soon as they finish. I was more relaxed after that, but yesterday everything was wrong again because Ashley told me that they are not going to finish the paper until Wednesday. I asked her that we needed for that day and she sent us saying that she didn't recommend us to send it because there are some things wrong. I was really surprised. In all my life I have never seen that. There must be a misunderstood because it is really inconceivable.

In one hand, if we are the same group, with the same case and the same paper, we should have the same death line. I don't understand why we had to present the paper in Monday and they on Wednesday. In the other hand, the American part of the group not only don't have respect the group's death line, but also they haven't respect us when we have asked them the work finished because we have to deliver it. Without the paper that they were working on we couldn't do anything. It was very annoying.



There has been another misunderstood because Anton sent to you an e-mail explaining the situation and you haven't received it. I was surprised when I realise that you haven't received that mail because Anton is very responsible and committed with the group. The rest of the group has disappointed me day by day. I really had good vibrations with the team but today everything has changed.

*John*

The last couple of weeks of the quarter were difficult for me to fully participate in my group. I had to move to New York City and at this point my communication with the rest of the team diminished. ... Especially, with being in office training from 8am-10pm in NYC for the last two weeks I have fallen out of touch with my group's progress. It would have been nice to know how our presentation went and to have contributed in the final stages of its completion.

The work that I turned into Ashley about the Chinese culture flowed through into the final paper. While the extensive work that I did on establishing management structures to deal with cultural differences did not. I would have liked to have been able to add this material to the final paper but I was too busy with my head buried in the sand with my investment banking training to do so. ... Also, I have not seen our final paper and I do not know how our presentation turned out so I do not have a complete opinion of my team's success (or failure) as a virtual team.

Condensing all of this work into one week, preparing for my job, and getting ready to move to New York City really handicapped my ability to work in a timely manner. I tried my best to stay organised and meet deadlines but twenty-four hours in a day was simply just not enough time. I had too much on my plate and certain tasks took priority over others. Because all of this was going on in my life I was unable to step up as a leader in the group and push Jenny and Ashley to meet their own deadlines.

All of this confusing could have been avoided if prior to setting the deadlines I would have informed all of my teammates that there was a very high possibility that my life was going to slide into complete chaos a few weeks before I left for New York City, that they should proceed on without me, and my assignments might be a few days late. I should have also taken on some non-crucial assignments so that the project could proceed and my work could just be added to the final product and would not serve as the backbone of the project.

One thing that I feel strongly about when it comes to the success of virtual teams is structure. Our team needed more structure to our work. We needed to set up a meeting time on instant messenger or Skype to discuss certain aspects of our project at least once a week. In a work setting this structure is established by the team leader. However, in our group we had two team leaders;



one in Austria and one in Cincinnati. The lack of structure really hurt the efficiency with which our team worked.

### *Ashley*

As this project comes to an end, my impressions and thoughts of my team resemble a rollercoaster.

A few weeks into the quarter I realised that this group project may be similar to every other group project, with the typical “slackers” and the “over-achievers” and the constant tension between the two.

In the middle of the quarter, we received our grade on the case study, a 3.5. I do take responsibility for this low, disappointing grade because I was responsible for integrated everyone’s delegated portion, and editing and submitting the paper.

After confirming they would attend the meeting, neither Jenny nor John showed up for the meeting. At this point, I was annoyed with their work ethic and unreliable attitude of the US team members. ... I am conflict-avoidant: I spoke with Jenny and John on a few occasions, asking them to contribute more to the group, cite their sources, and attend scheduled meetings. However, I did not want to argue with my team.

Working virtually did not present as many obstacles as I originally thought. During the first few weeks, we had issues figuring out the time difference, using Skype, and communicating via MSN. However, in five weeks, I was able to communicate with the Austrians one a daily basis. We could ask and answer questions in a few hours, and even convey thoughts and ideas using Skype telephone. This class taught me that it is relatively easy to communicate globally. The language, distance and technological barriers are not as difficult as I once thought.

### *Jenny*

On top of the already difficult task of getting a group of people to have the same free time; add the extremely long distance and time difference in to the mix and you get by far the hardest thing to ever successfully accomplish...a virtual team. I think that I would have definitely enjoyed the class more if I wasn’t taking four others, if I didn’t have two 30 page papers that were due by the end of the quarter, if I had the technology to better communicate with the people across the country and if I had more time to devote to the assignments that were due.

I think that the lack of face-to-face communication was detrimental to the project. We only had two video conferences in 10 weeks.

I also think that on my part of the group work anyways, I lacked the technology (IE: Skype) to effectively communicate with the Austrian group members.

Also some of their emails were “gappy”, meaning they didn’t make sense and we had clearly not received a few of their emails either. To solve this problem we just again remained patient and I just let Ashley be the mail contact and communicator between all of us because her email was working the best. I don’t know how the Austrian students felt about this but it seemed to start working better that way towards the end of the quarter.

There was a lot that everyone overlooked IE: cultural differences, language differences, time differences, differences in work ethics, schedule differences and expectation differences in general. I don’t think that there is enough literature to fully prepare anyone and fill them in on the difficulties of working in a virtual team.

1. What do you think of the different perceptions of individual team members regarding the overall team work?
2. How do you evaluate the processes and interactions that took place in this team?
3. What were the consequences?
4. What were the different approaches employed by individual team members to enhance the situation? What do you think of them?
5. What are your recommendations regarding possible strategies to avoid such situations?

# Worksheet: Tensions in Multicultural Teams



## PART II

Suppose you have to evaluate the performance of the individual team members. Together with your team, evaluate the aspects from the table for each person's performance in the team. If you do not feel that you can assess some of the items for individual team members, leave them out. For evaluations of 0, 1 or 5, please provide examples that justify the score.

Scale	
0 = failed to perform satisfactorily	3 = modest performance
5 = very poor performance	2 = good performance
4 = marginal performance	1 = superior / excellent performance

Performance Area	Anton	Jiri	Carmen	John	Ashley	Jenny
Performance Area						
Overall Performance						
Performed tasks on time						
Performed tasks at high quality						
Coordinated with team						
Met expectations						
Thorough						
Cooperative						
Pleasant						
Efficient						
Other criteria _____						



# Worksheet: Tensions in Multicultural Teams



## PART III

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The statements suggest tensions and latent conflict in the team residing from the difficulties encountered by individual team members. Previous research has distinguished between three types of conflict: affective, task, and process (cf. Hinds and Bailey, 2003).

- **Affective conflict:** conflict that arises from perceived incompatibilities and clashing personalities and brings about negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, distrust and hostility.
- **Task conflict:** conflict over the task resulting from different opinions and viewpoints about the work to be performed and about what should be done.
- **Process conflict:** conflict about how the task should be carried out.

Based on the statements and your personal experience, discuss the impact of the following elements on the two different types of conflict in multicultural teams. Also, try to find examples for both, functional and dysfunctional conflict. Share your findings in your small group.

	Affective Conflict	Task Conflict
Cultural heterogeneity		
Physical distance		
Communication style		
Communication technology		
Shared team identity		
Performance		
Other _____		