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**Edited by  
Prof. Paola Demartini  
and  
Prof. Michela Marchiori**

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# Culture, Communication and Performance in Multi and Mono-Cultural Teams: Results of a Study Analysed by the System of Organisational Terms and Narrative Analysis

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**Abstract:** This paper presents results of a study which investigates the impact of culture and communication (virtual and face-to-face) on generating solutions in multi-and mono-cultural teams. The study was conducted among fifty BA business students in Helsinki, Finland. It combines qualitative (narrative analysis) and quantitative (structured work observation with online management tools) approaches. The narrative analysis provides retrospective insights into individual reflections on the team members communication process. The structured work observation provides simultaneous insights into team communication process. The study aims to determine the correlation between the cultural origin of the team and the team communication. Secondly, the study compares the findings of qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection. The discussion drew on Hall's (1976) concepts of communication patterns in low- and high-context cultures as well as Hofstede's (2010) selected cultural dimensions. The findings of narrative analysis revealed that communication during the process of task completion among participants from low-context cultures was more successful and generated more output than that of their counterparts from high-context cultures. Language barriers in multi-cultural teams did not have significant influence on the team performance in terms of output generation. The findings of the analysis produced by using online management tools showed that the amount of outputs did not strongly correlate with the way of communicating during the project. The contributions of this paper are (1) demonstrating the impact of culture on team communication, (2) highlighting the importance and influence of communication on team's effectiveness, (3) showing the benefits of applying two distinct research approaches at different stages of the study.

**Keywords:** culture, team communication, narrative analysis, system of organisational terms, online management tools

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## 1. Introduction

Communication plays fundamental role in business activities, business being a collaborative activity. Daily business practices are shaped by deeply-held cultural attitudes toward work, power, trust, wealth, and communication (Hooker, 2008). Communication styles vary enormously around the world, thus creating a plethora of business styles. Communication is also a complex and dynamic process in which members of international and global companies exchange meaning (Clausen, 2007). As the teamwork approach is the organising principle in most modern business activities that involve innovation through solving problems (Leenders et al. 2003), work carried out in international, multicultural teams represents a crucial part of assignments completed in a business environment (Barczak et al. 2010).

From the perspective of team communication, whose rationale we present in Related works, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

- how does culture of the team members influence their communication?
- how does communication in multicultural teams influence generating solutions?
- do culturally homogenous teams communicate better than culturally heterogenous teams?
- is there a correlation between the quality of communication and team performance and efficiency (generated solutions)?

From the methodological perspective, this paper compares the results of two distinct research methods: (1) narrative analysis and (2) an observation of teams using online management tools. This combined approach is unique to investigating cultural aspects of team communication. It allows deeper insights into the communication process from the point of view of individual members, as well as the teams, at different stages of the project.

## **2. Related works**

### **2.1 Concept of culture**

Despite their different takes on the concept of culture, many definitions (Murphy, 1986; Hall, 1996; Barker, 2002; Shein, 2004; Hofstede, 2010;) share such common understandings: combinations of customs, beliefs, practices, knowledge as well as “signifying systems” of languages. Hofstede’s (2010) concept of culture as “software of the mind” implies that all human activity is a result of conscious and sub-conscious mind. Barker (2002, 222-223) expands these concepts by acknowledging the temporary and dynamic aspects of culture. For him culture is a product of “routes” and “constellations of temporary coherence or knots in the field of social space that are the product of relations and interconnections from the very local to the intercontinental”.

Cultural encounters as well as cultural clashes can contribute to the success or failure of communities, organisations and other groups of people (Warrick, 2017). As culture is a product of meaningful practices constructed and shared by creative capacities of ordinary people, it is also expressed in a variety of ways by those people through shared or different ways of communication.

Therefore, the impact of culture on communication, especially in multinational environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be ignored. It is especially important in the context of multicultural companies and organisations, as it strongly influences their productivity and efficiency (Hajro & Pudelko, 2009).

### **2.2 Influence of culture on team communication**

Multinational companies rely increasingly on virtual means of team communication when working on projects (Grosse, 2002). In multicultural and multilingual teams, choosing the most appropriate means of communication is crucial to the successful flow of communication.

Previous research on culturally diverse teams explored a variety of factors influencing performance of teams. For example, Stahl et al. (2010) suggest that cultural diversity's effect on teams is mediated by specific team processes, such as losses and gains associated with increased divergence and decreased convergence. Carte and Chidambaram (2004) contribute to this view by developing an integrated model of ongoing team interaction, which describes how the purposeful deployment of certain collaborative technology capabilities helps leverage the positive aspects of diversity while limiting its negative aspects.

Challenges associated with creating and maintaining trust in global and virtual teams were explored by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999). They suggest that global virtual teams develop “swift” trust, but such trust is very fragile. Trust, liking and performance in virtual teams were further explored by Walther and Bunz (2005), who linked behaviours, subjective effect and output. Their research suggested that following a powerful set of collaboration rules reduces uncertainty and enhances trust in distributed work teams. Team face-to-face and computer mediated communication was explored by Becker-Beck et al. (2005), who focused on the principles regulating interaction in teams in terms of group work, satisfaction, and performance.

## **3. Environment of the study and research methods**

### **3.1 Environment of the study**

We conducted the study between 26<sup>th</sup> of September and 20<sup>th</sup> of December 2017 among 50 BA business students at Haaga-Helia UAS, in Helsinki, Finland. The class was divided into eight purposeful teams of five. Three teams were homogenous culturally and linguistically. Five teams were heterogenous both culturally and linguistically. The common working language was English.

Their task was to generate ideas for a development project aimed at improving communication among their teachers, during planning and implementing semester modules. The result of the teams’ work was a written report containing two parts: training programme details (number of participants, venue, duration, goals of the project, benefits for the participants, training methods) and teamwork process (individual reflections on the work process, possible difficulties, benefits). To complete the assignment, the students were asked to use managerial tools, available from Transistorhead.com. The platform consisted of ten online managerial tools for

setting goals, describing tasks, generating ideas, specifying ideas, creating options, choosing options, checking motivation, solving conflicts, preparing meetings, and explaining problems.

### 3.2 Research methods

In order to gain insights into the way communication took place we collected our data at two different stages of the study, applying two different approaches: retrospectively, through individual narratives written after the study, and simultaneously, through team observation using online management tools during the study. Whereas the narratives provided a qualitative data set (words), the observation produced recorded quantitative data set (frequency of using the online tools, longevity of time periods spent on teamwork).

In the narrative approach, we drew on the conceptual roots of narrative analysis (NA) located within the Deweyan ontology of experience (Dewey, 1938). We view the focus of NA as being located not only in the individual's experience, but also in the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which the individual's experiences are constituted and enacted. For the sake of this study we only focus on sociality (Connelly and Clandinin 2006). We see sociality as situations where people always and simultaneously find themselves in both personal and social conditions. The personal conditions can be feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions as well as their moral dispositions. This conceptualisation connects with Dewey's notion of interaction: people, in their experiences, are always in interaction with the situations as well as other people.

The epistemological implications of the above ontological approach meant that the purpose of our inquiry was not to create a faithful representation of the reality, independent of the knower, but on the contrary, to investigate the phenomena, and by an interpretative process generate an understanding of it based on the relation between a human being and his/her environment. Therefore, when interpreting the meaning of the narratives, we considered the wider context in which they were produced. This consideration made us discard two of the ten groups, as the narratives clearly showed that a negative attitude of the students towards their studies in general had too strong an impact on the reliability of their narratives in our study.

In the observation approach we drew on the theoretical concept called a managerial action, and which can be defined as a real activity, which a manager performs to play a managerial role when he has a certain managerial skill (Flak, Yang, & Grzegorzek, 2017). However, we did not observe only team managers but also all team members with the same theoretical pattern shown in Figure 1.

The theoretical background for such an approach is the system of organisational terms, an original methodological concept of research in management (Flak, 2013a). The philosophical foundation of the system of organisational terms is based on Wittgenstein's theory of facts (the only beings in the world) and "states of facts" (Brink & Rewitzky, 2002). This theory's main assumption is that there are two types of beings in the world: events and things.

As shown in Figure 1, when a team manager or a team member sets a goal, at a certain moment a managerial action occurs, represented by *set 1.1* (an event) and *goal 1.1* (a thing). Specifically, each event and thing have labels *n.m*, in which *n* and *m* represent a number and a version of a thing, respectively. What is important, *goal 1.1* has features in time, content and human relations domains.

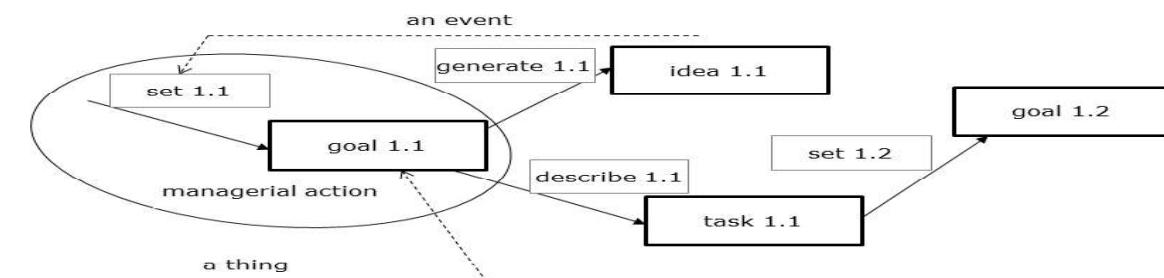


Figure 1: Fundamental structure of managerial actions

If later (e.g. after the next managerial action – *describe 1.1* and *task 1.1*) this team manager does the next setting of the same goal, he launches the next managerial action. Consequently, the features of this goal change (*goal 1.1* changed into *goal 1.2*) and represent the second version of this managerial action (described by the pair of

the event and the thing: *set 1.2* and *goal 1.2*). The difference between managerial action comprising *goal 1.2* and *goal 1.1*. allow reasoning on the events which happened in real time (what team manager/ team member really did).

From the theoretical point of view, online management tools have the following features:

- according to the idea of a “unit of behaviour” (Curtis et al., 1992) every online management tool tracks and records one specific managerial action (described in Section 3);
- every time a manager uses any online management tool an event occurs in the organisational environment. This affects a thing, in other words, equal to a process which results in a resource, respectively (Flak, 2013b) (Figure 1);
- every tool is useful for recording a certain managerial action (Flak, 2013a).

Online management tools were available with the website browser. The tool platform, called TransistorsHead, was available at [transistorshead.com](http://transistorshead.com) (logins for trial version – name of the team: manager, username: manager, password: manager).

### **3.3 Data analysis**

The basic level of qualitative analysis involved eliciting emerging themes in the narrative accounts of the communication process produced retrospectively, after the completion of the task. To ensure “qualitative rigour” (Gioia et al. 2012), while at the same time keeping an open and creative mind, we used a “systematic inductive approach to concept development” (Gioia et al. 2012, 16). First-order analysis that adopts informant-centric in vivo codes (Saldana, 2009) were created. In the second phase of the analysis we grouped these codes according to the similarities and relationships between them.

Next, we tried to answer the question of whether the emerging themes point to concepts that might explain or describe the concepts relating to the way the team worked and communicated, and what the participants highlighted in their narratives. We identified all possible second-order codes and developed them further into what Gioia et al. (2012) call second-order “aggregate dimensions”, and what we call “motivation factors”.

The quantitative analysis was done based on numeric data recorded during teamwork observation using online management tools as research tools (2). This approach focused on the team communication process during the completion of the task.

The first level of the quantitative analysis comprised general statistics of participants’ activities they undertook during the study. The statistics included types of participants (team leaders or team members), duration of teamwork from the first login to last logout in seconds, number of actions, number of managerial actions (any subtypes). The second level of analysis was based on detailed parameters about particular managerial actions (e.g. setting goals, describing tasks etc.), numbers of their versions and correlations between them.

## **4. Results and discussion**

### **4.1 Qualitative analysis**

To better understand cultural intricacies in business communication, we draw on Edward T. Hall’s (1976) concepts of low- and high- context cultures, as well as Geert Hofstede’s (2010) dimensions of individualism vs collectivism. We see a strong correlation between high-context and collectivist cultures, as well as low-context and individualistic cultures, hence the selection. We also find these dimensions most relevant to our study of communication, hence the exclusion of Hofstede’s remaining four dimensions.

Also relevant is Hall’s distinction between rule-based and relationship-based cultures, grounded deeply in the understanding of human nature (Hooker 2008). In relationship-based, high-context cultures, the unit of human existence is larger than the individual and extends to a larger community. For individuals from relationship-based cultures, belonging to a group is unequivocal to their existence. The centrality of relationships in relationship-based cultures therefore has an ontological basis in a communal sense. These cultures are also what Hofstede (2010) calls collectivistic. Conversely, rule-based, low-context cultures regard human beings as autonomous individuals. Autonomy means in part that no individual has natural authority over another. The centrality of rules

in rule-based cultures therefore has an ontological basis in the conception of human beings as autonomous individuals. These cultures, according to Hofstede's dimensions, are individualistic.

The concepts described above explain the communication patterns and the work process in our study: the individuals belonging to rule-based, low-context individualistic cultures, with a common native language described their communication as "efficient, good, synergic". Their primary focus was completing the task, whereas building relationships was not of primary importance. The group was only an instrument in the process of task completion, hence the motivation factor: group-work to accomplish the task.

Conversely, the individuals belonging to relationship-based, high-context, collectivistic cultures described their communication as "challenging, really hard and difficult". Even though their motivation factor was completing the task, their primary focus was on relationship building. Their motivation factor was first building relationships, as a necessary step, before beginning the group work, to accomplish the task.

Both rule- and relationship-based cultures have rules and laws. The difference lies in the roots of compliance to these rules. In rule-based, low-context cultures, where the rules are spelled out explicitly, people respect them for their own sake, and communication is clear and straightforward. By contrast, in relationship-based, high context cultures people respect the persons who laid the rules down (Hooker, 2008). Therefore, the gradual process of building personal relationships and trust is of great importance. Communication is not always straightforward, and can be ambiguous, thus hampering understanding.

In our study, the low-context culture individuals from groups (1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) communicated faster, and the process went smoothly and efficiently, whereas the individuals from groups with high-context cultures described their communication as difficult. However, the two groups (1 and 2) that were composed of members who shared a native language generated different numbers of solutions, and used different words to describe the work process, and the motivation factors were different (Table 1). Whereas for group 1, their enthusiasm for working as group was the driving force, for groups 2 and 3 the driving force was solely the task completion.

We concluded that sharing a common native language did not guarantee generating the highest number of solutions. The main factor in our study was the groups' attitudes, as expressed in their narratives: group 1 that showed most enthusiasm for completing the task together as a group generated the highest number of solutions. Even though all three groups (1, 2 and 3), are classified as rule-based, low-context and individualistic, they differed in the way they communicated and in the number of solutions they produced.

The key words, also reflecting cultural values, provide an explanation for these differences (Table 1). The Finns (group 3), who are used to effective group work (*solutions*), as well as swift task completion (*we did not slack around*) divided the work equally among all group members (*equally contributing team members*). The French (group 1), being motivated exchange students, not used to team work (*motivation*), enjoyed the new experience of working together (*synergy, together*) and produced many solutions. Finally, the Americans (group 3), the most individualistic and highly competitive culture (Hofstede, 2010) *shared power* and through *effective decision making*, completed the task. International groups (4 and 5), although representing low-context cultures, expressed their co-operation with different key words. Group 4 focused more on *helping each other*, and group 5 relied on the team to complete the task. This difference is due to a slight mix in the collectivist/individualist composition of the team.

This mix is more visible in the composition of groups 6 and 7, representing high-context cultures, and predominantly collectivist. To overcome potential difficulties, they focused on *completing the task quickly* and using *straight talk*. Group 8, being high-context and collectivist, where centrality of trust and relationships plays pivotal role before any common task can be completed, used such key words as: *challenges and miscommunication*.



**Table 1:** Groups' national and cultural characteristics, their communication and outputs. The numerical values in the third column express levels of individualism vs. collectivism

Group number	Group name and characteristic	Level of individualism vs collectivism	Low context vs high context	Generated solutions	Communication Key words	Motivation factors
1	Les Baguettes (French)	68	LC	7	Motivation, synergy, together	Team work motivated, task completion motivated
2	Mean Girls (American)	91	LC	5	Effective, power shared, solutions, decision making	Task completion motivated
3	The Sailors (Finnish)	63	LC	1	Effective, equal contribution, solutions, did not slack around	Task completion motivated
4	De Bedeendjes (International)	63, 68, 46,	LC	1	Worked well, help of others, challenges	Team work motivated
5	All Gucci (International)	75, 80	LC	1	Good co-operation, equal contribution, happy with the team	Team work motivated
6	Vindicators (International)	80, 30, 20,	HC	1	Quick, clear, team management	Task completion motivated
7	East meets West (International)	39, 38, 63, 30	HC	1	Quick, complete the task, straight talk	Task completion motivated
8	Noodles (International)	20, 48,	HC	1	Challenges, really hard, miscommunication	Task completion motivated

## 4.2 Quantitative analysis

The online management tools recorded the activities of participants and gave a precise view of what the teams did during the project. We decided to use general statistics to monitor the teams work process: the number of times a particular online management tool was used (Table 2) and the number of items (results of using the tools) generated in the final versions, at the end of the observation (Table 3). Based on these parameters we drew conclusions about the communication process.

Table 2 shows that team 4 was most active. They used the online management tools 3,620 times and was mostly focused on setting goals (815 times) and generating ideas (1,368). They used the tool to share and specify ideas 234 times, and to make decisions 271 times. This does not mean that they created a large number of items. The team created only 12 goals, four descriptions of ideas and made only one decision. These figures show that the team was motivated by their co-operation, mutual help in archiving their goals.

By comparison, team 5 used the online management tools only 756 times. The proportions of using the same types of tools were similar, but they used the tool for setting goals only 224 times and for generating ideas 253 times. They also created very few items (15 compared to 28 of group 4). Therefore, the communication process between members of this team was weak. However, they were motivated by the teamwork, which is seen in the parameter of decisions made together (3). They used the tool for that 52 times, which is a good proportion, compared to group 4, where these figures were 1 and 271, respectively.

Table 2 also shows that the three mono-cultural teams, group 1, 2 and 3, were also very active in communication. They reached a high level in using the tools (except the Finns) – about 2,000 times during the observation. Their last versions of items in the tools were also in high numbers (except the Americans). It is surprising to notice that the Americans, commonly perceived as goal oriented, had only one goal at the end compared to 5 and 6

for the French and Finnish teams, respectively. However, the Americans were better in generating ideas and creating options.

Team 8 demonstrated the weakest communication process. They used the online management tools only 416 times focusing mostly on setting goals (102) and generating ideas (156 times). The numbers of items were low as well. They did not make any decision together, did not describe any ideas in detail. They tried to find solutions to conflicts they encountered, and they used the tool to resolve conflicts 23 times. They created one solution in the end. The co-operation and the communication process were very weak.

**Table 2:** The number of times the tools were used during the research

Team number	Team name	Total	Setting goals	Describing tasks	Generating ideas	Specifying ideas	Creating options	Choosing options	Checking-up motivation	Solving conflicts	Preparing meetings	Explaining problems
1	Les Baguettes	2,027	548	689	355	54	27	84	88	60	104	18
2	Mean Girls	2,188	532	379	704	119	176	177	45	21	19	16
3	The Sailors	1,748	290	335	492	191	64	152	62	38	61	63
4	De Badeendjes	3,620	815	301	1,368	234	69	271	346	35	168	13
5	All Gucci	756	224	104	253	37	29	52	30	13	8	6
6	Vindicators	931	188	173	419	36	18	15	25	13	23	21
7	East meets West	2,038	409	484	407	132	405	56	42	47	30	26
8	Noodles	416	102	31	156	36	31	8	19	23	5	5

**Table 3:** The number of items in the last versions at the end of the observation

Team number	Team name	Total	Goals	Tasks	Ideas generation	Ideas specification	Options	Choices	Motivation check-up	Solutions	Meeting agendas	Problem explanations
1	Les Baguettes	24	5	7	1	0	1	6	1	1	1	1
2	Mean Girls	12	1	1	5	0	3	2	0	0	0	0
3	The Sailors	34	6	12	2	2	0	0	2	2	4	4
4	De Badeendjes	28	12	3	2	4	0	1	1	0	5	0
5	All Gucci	15	4	6	1	0	0	3	1	0	0	0
6	Vindicators	20	3	5	8	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
7	East meets West	10	1	3	1	0	4	0	0	0	1	0
8	Noodles	7	2	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0

## 5. Conclusions

Staples et al. (2006) examined the effect of cultural diversity on team effectiveness when working face-to-face or using virtual tools. Their study revealed that culturally heterogeneous teams, when working face-to-face, were less satisfied and cohesive than the culturally homogenous ones. When working virtually, the performance of virtual culturally heterogeneous teams was superior to the performance of the culturally heterogeneous teams.

Our study complements these findings by adding the impact of communication on team effectiveness. There is a correlation between communication and generating solutions. There is also a correlation between the quality of communication and the cultural composition of the teams.

Firstly, culturally homogenous teams, communicated more effectively and generated most solutions. Culturally heterogeneous teams showed frequent communication but did not generate many solutions.

Secondly, the culture of individual team members played a significant role in their communication. Culturally homogenous teams, sharing native language, prefers face-to face communication, did not use management tools often but achieved high output results. Conversely, in culturally heterogenous teams the intensity of communication was high, but the output of results was low.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches provided comprehensive results. Whereas the quantitative analysis provided insights into the stages of the work process itself, the qualitative analysis of the narratives highlighted the personal aspects of the communication process. Monitored and recorded observation (online management tools) during the process of the study provided numerical measurements of the teams' work time periods and the number of actions taken. Narrative analysis of the individual written reflective accounts, after the completion of the study, provided insights into the communication of individual team members.

The findings of the two methodological approaches contributed to creating a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the motivational influence of culture on communication, and the importance, and impact of communication on teams' effectiveness in terms of generating solutions.

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