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Abstract

This master's thesis explores the intricate dynamics of cross-cultured dispersed teams working from home. The central research question guiding this study is: What challenges do current leaders of dispersed teams encounter in the growing trend of telework, and how can they effectively address these challenges? Now, let us address the key findings of the research paper.

First of all, the onboarding process emerged as a pivotal factor in shaping trust levels within dispersed teams. A well-structured onboarding process facilitated the rapid development of trust, while challenges during integration required more time for trust to flourish.

Second, trust dynamics among team members exhibited significant variability. Individual experiences upon joining the team led to distinct levels of trust and the pace at which trust was established, emphasizing the need for leaders to recognize and accommodate these variations. In paying close attention to the onboarding process and building trust by keeping close touch with the team members the initial trust will strengthen.

The third finding concerns open communication and how highly valued it was, however, not absolute. Privacy and confidentiality concerns were evident, requiring leaders to strike a delicate balance between open dialogue and accountability. Continuing with team members' prior knowledge of and familiarity with their leader exhibited higher levels of loyalty and satisfaction. The leader's role in fostering trust, open communication, and relationships was pivotal, especially during onboarding. Additionally, the researcher recognizes the importance of regular interaction, not only during the onboarding period but in general as well. Occasional team meetings positively impacted relationships and collaboration among cross-cultural team members, reinforcing the significance of maintaining interpersonal connections in dispersed teams.

For teams composed of individuals from diverse cultures, the importance of effective communication and trust-building becomes even more pronounced. The cultural background of a team is indeed a crucial factor that should not be overlooked. Failing to understand and acknowledge cultural differences within a team can result in a host of issues, both within the team itself and in the relationship between team members and their leader. In this particular study, it was evident that the team lead shared a cultural affinity with the team members, which had a profoundly positive impact on the overall dynamics and understanding within the team. This cultural closeness facilitated effective communication, mutual respect, and a greater sense

of unity among team members and their leader. Recognizing and embracing cultural diversity can be a powerful catalyst for success in a multicultural team, fostering an environment where different perspectives and backgrounds are valued and leveraged for the benefit of the entire group. Finally, building strong relationships and trust from the outset proved crucial for long-term team cohesion and performance.

A specific team within a chosen company served as the focal point, enabling an in-depth exploration of their unique experiences. Six semi-structured interviews with cross-country team members and the team leader from different cultural backgrounds, lasting 45 to 70 minutes each, provided a holistic perspective on team dynamics and challenges.

This study aspires to offer practical guidance for team leaders navigating the challenges of remote work in cross-cultural teams. The research outcomes, combined with best practices and lessons learned, aim to inform the development of a practical guide or set of recommendations. These resources will empower leaders to effectively manage dispersed teams in teleworking environments, enhancing team effectiveness and adaptability.

In conclusion, this master's thesis illuminates the multifaceted aspects of trust, onboarding experiences, communication dynamics, and cultural proficiency within dispersed teams. The findings emphasize the importance of early trust-building, onboarding process, open communication, etc. By recognizing and addressing these dynamics, leaders can effectively manage dispersed teams, facilitating enhanced team performance and adaptability in the telework era.

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Definition of terms

In the research paper, the terms "dispersed teams," "virtual teams," and "global teams" are used interchangeably to describe teams whose members are geographically separated and rely on communication technology for collaboration. These terms essentially refer to the same concept in the context of the paper.

Dispersed Teams/ Virtual Teams/ Global Teams: These are teams made up of individuals located in different geographic areas who primarily use information and communication technologies (ICTs) for their collaboration. (Magni, Ahuja, and Maruping, 2018). They often have members from diverse national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. (Presbitero and Teng-Calleja, 2019)

Additionally, in the context of the study, the terms "telework," "homeworking," and "working from home" all refer to the same phenomenon of individuals conducting their work activities from their homes or remote locations. While there may be subtle differences in terminology, for the purpose of this study, these terms are used interchangeably to describe the act of working remotely, often with the use of communication technology to connect with their workplace or colleagues.

Telework/ Homeworking/Working from Home: These terms involve the practice of working from one's home or another remote location while maintaining communication with the office or colleagues through means such as phone, email, or the Internet. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Finally, Throughout the research paper, the pseudonym "**THE COMPANY**" is consistently employed to maintain the confidentiality of the company's name and the specific team under investigation.

1. Introduction

In the Information Age and the age of globalization, work dynamics, and leadership are undergoing profound changes (Bamberger and Meshoulam, 2014). Traditional offices are no longer the sole hub of productivity, with remote and dispersed work arrangements breaking geographical boundaries (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). This thesis delves into the intricacies of leadership and teamwork in dispersed cross-cultural teams, addressing the growing relevance of these models as organizations adopt remote work (Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam, 2009).

This master thesis delves into the challenges faced by leaders and team members in a specific company in staying on track with the growing trend of teleworking. The decision to study this particular company was driven by initial exchanges with the company's leaders, which shed light on the unique struggles they encountered in adapting to teleworking practices. Informed by these conversations, the researcher recognized the significance of investigating the factors influencing team effectiveness within this context. The study was conducted through an extensive literature review and six semi-structured interviews, to gain insights into the interdependencies among various factors affecting dispersed cross-cultural teams. The interviews were conducted with both team members and the team leader, providing a holistic perspective on the dynamics within the team. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 70 minutes, depending on the willingness and availability of the interviewees. The semi-structured interview approach offered flexibility in exploring the research topic while ensuring consistency in addressing the core themes identified in the conceptual framework. (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Through these interviews, the researcher aimed to gain in-depth insights into the experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by team members and leaders in navigating the transition to teleworking. By focusing on a specific team within the company, the study aimed to capture the unique dynamics and interactions within that context, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of current challenges.

The primary aim of this study was to collect comprehensive data and insights that would contribute to the development of a practical guide or set of recommendations. These resources would be specifically designed to assist team leaders in overcoming challenges faced by cross-cultural dispersed teams working from home.

2. Problem formulation

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event in history, with no similar occurrence in recent generations (Venkatesh, 2020). Amid the disruptive effects of the pandemic, it has also created opportunities for adaptation. One significant change has been the surge in remote work adoption, driven by the necessity to adapt to the pandemic's challenges. Millions of individuals worldwide transitioned to remote work, with businesses making substantial efforts to enable their employees to work from home to ensure continuity. In today's fast-evolving global landscape, the nature of work has undergone a profound transformation. A significant catalyst for this change has been the growing trend of telework, driven by technological advancements and the need for flexibility in a dynamic world. As organizations increasingly embrace telework to harness a broader talent pool and adapt to shifting market demands, the dynamics of teams have also evolved. One of the emerging challenges faced by contemporary leaders is how to effectively lead dispersed cross-cultural teams in this teleworking era.

In the evolving work environment, the leadership's role is pivotal, given the limited in-person interactions. Leaders face new challenges due to this changing dynamic (Carsten et al., 2021). Leaders must pay close attention to virtual signals to interpret and adapt successfully to virtualization. Working across different time zones can challenge leaders in fostering trust, communication, and cohesion. To navigate evolving work arrangements, virtual leaders must expedite their strategies and approaches (Mutha and Srivastava, 2021). Research by Gajendran and Harrison (2007) highlights that the nature of work has shifted, with telework becoming a prevalent mode of operation in many organizations. This transformation has led to the need for leaders to adapt their leadership styles and strategies to accommodate dispersed teams effectively. Furthermore, a study by van den Heuvel and Bondarouk (2017) emphasizes the importance of understanding the challenges of leading cross-cultural teams, particularly in a virtual context. Cultural differences can significantly impact team dynamics, communication, and collaboration (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000), and leaders must navigate these differences effectively to ensure team success.

Research question:

What challenges are current leaders of dispersed cross-cultural teams facing in the growing trend of telework and how can they overcome them?

For purposes of this study, this research question was divided into 2 main parts which will help better understand and research this issue.

The resulting parts are:

- 1) Challenges of dispersed, cross-cultural teams
- 2) How to overcome the challenges

This provides a structured and comprehensive framework for investigating this complex issue. Additionally, considering the three distinct aspects of the team - remote work, cultural diversity(cross-cultural team), and geographical dispersion (dispersed team) - as potential sources of challenges underscores the multifaceted nature of the problem. Each of these aspects can introduce unique dynamics and obstacles, making it crucial to address them individually within the broader context of the research question. This approach allows for a thorough examination of the interplay between telework, leadership, and team dynamics, offering valuable insights for leaders of dispersed cross-cultural teams.

In conclusion, the research question emerged from the intersection of a changing work landscape, the prevalence of telework, the complexities of cross-cultural team dynamics, and the evolving role of leadership. Understanding the challenges faced by leaders of dispersed cross-cultural teams in the context of telework is not only academically significant but also essential for organizations striving to thrive in the globalized, teleworking era. By combining firsthand experiences, literature, and secondary data, this paper provides valuable recommendations for improved leadership effectiveness.

3. Company Introduction

“The company” is an established name in its field, known for its many years of experience and strong position in the market. It has been giving both people and businesses a wide range of insurance goods and services. “The company” is known for its commitment to reliable coverage and great customer service.

The company underwent significant digitalization processes, which were further accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, certain company offices had to close temporarily, leading to a swift transition of their employees into full telework mode. However, as the pandemic gradually receded, the company made a strategic decision not to revert to its pre-pandemic operational model. Instead, it actively embraced and supported further digitalization initiatives, recognizing the benefits and efficiencies it offered to both the company and its employees. This marked a pivotal shift in the company's approach to work and technology.

In recent times, the company has prioritized strengthening connections between its Czech and Slovak branches, with key decision-making roles now shared by board members from both countries. Notably, the leadership team includes members from other nations like Germany and Serbia, introducing diverse cultural perspectives. This shift has led to greater collaboration and role-sharing among branches, resulting in a more integrated approach to decision-making and improved organizational coordination. Board members from the Czech and Slovak branches jointly carry decision-making responsibilities, emphasizing closer ties and collaboration. This shared leadership approach leverages local expertise from both countries, enhancing the quality of decisions. Additionally, as a response to these digitalization efforts, certain managerial roles within the company began to be shared between teams in Slovakia and Czechia. This organizational shift led to changes in team structures and compositions, resulting in the formation of mixed Czechoslovakian teams. This transformation added another layer of complexity to the already diverse and geographically dispersed teams, further emphasizing the need to address the challenges associated with telework and leadership in such a dynamic environment.

3.1 Team Introduction

This master's thesis examines the dynamics of a geographically dispersed policy administration team working from home and operating within an international insurance company. The team is responsible for various aspects of insurance policy management.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, team members were accustomed to working from designated office spaces in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Their primary mode of operation was in office. However, the dynamics of the team underwent significant changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to full-time telework was necessitated by the pandemic and proved to be remarkably efficient for the team. This transition allowed team members to work remotely, even from their respective residences, providing them with increased flexibility in their work locations.

Additionally, the team experienced changes in its composition during the pandemic, with some members leaving the company and new members, such as Veronika and Boris, joining remotely (see team members' introduction in Table 1). Whereas before the start of the pandemic teams of policy administrations only consisted of one nationality and worked only from the office. This unique situation means that certain team members have not had the opportunity to meet Veronika and Boris in person, which may have influenced the team's dynamics and interpersonal relationships. It's important to note that within this geographically dispersed team, there is no additional hierarchy or distinct roles among team members. This equality of tasks promotes a sense of collaboration and shared accountability, contributing to a cohesive and cooperative working environment.

Below is a summary of the interviewed team members and team lead. This information includes their names, nationalities, current residence, ages, roles within a policy administration team, and the duration of their tenure within the company. These details provide insights into teams' experiences and the variances in their initial understanding of the company and their trust. Understanding these differences is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of leadership effectiveness in the context of dispersed teams within an internationalized company.

Name	Role	Nationality/ Residence	Age	Joined the team
Maria	Policy Administration officer (Team member)	Slovak/ Slovakia	53 y/o	Before Covid
Boris	Policy Administration officer (Team member)	Slovak/ Slovakia	39 y/o	During Covid
Veronika	Policy Administration officer (Team member)	Czech/ Czechia	31 y/o	During Covid
Radoslav	Policy Administration officer (Team member)	Czech/ Czechia	43 y/o	Before Covid
Lucia	Policy Administration officer (Team member)	Czech/ Czechia	22 y/o	During Covid
Agata	Policy Administration Team Lead	Polish/ Slovakia	41 y/o	Before Covid

Table.1: Team Introduction (own design)

One notable characteristic of this team is its linguistic diversity, being mindful that not all team members are fluent in English. Some may have varying degrees of proficiency, which could pose challenges for effective communication and understanding within the team. It's worth highlighting the team's leadership. The team is led by a Polish leader who recognizes the importance of effective communication and collaboration, especially in a geographically dispersed setting. The leader in question has been a part of the company's Slovakia branch for several years now, contributing to their familiarity with the organization's culture, operations, and team members in that specific branch. To facilitate better communication and cooperation, the leader is actively learning Slovak, which is the primary language spoken by many team members. Polish leader is culturally close to the team members, who are from Slovakia and Czechia. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the study's findings and leadership recommendations may not be applicable in situations where the leader originates from a vastly distinct cultural background.

4. Literature review

The aim of this chapter is to provide information and theoretical background on leadership challenges and theories for leaders leading dispersed teams in internationalized firms, as well as propose strategies on how to overcome these challenges. As mentioned before, for the purpose of the study, the literature review will be structured in a manner to correspond with the research question division, which is in two parts, each corresponding with one section of the research question as depicted in Chapter 2.

4.1 Challenges of leadership in dispersed, cross-cultural teams

In this literature review chapter, let us look into the challenges posed by teams that are not only dispersed but also cross-cultural, and primarily working from home. The convergence of these three critical elements—dispersion, cultural diversity, and remote work—presents a unique set of challenges that demand careful examination. The researcher explores the nuances of communication across borders, the intricate nature of building trust in virtual spaces, the profound influence of culture on team dynamics, and the evolving role of leadership in this changing landscape. The paper recognizes that the traits of the teams the researcher studies necessitate a thoughtful approach. Therefore, the chapters that follow, have been divided to recognize and address the challenges separately. Let us decode the intricacies of these dispersed, cross-cultural, and remote teams, offering insights that can guide leaders and organizations toward effective collaboration and success in this evolving work environment.

4.1.1 Challenges of Leading Dispersed Teams

Geographically dispersed settings of a team, which can be defined as physical and temporal dispersion among members of the team, provide unique challenges that might heighten the significance of inspiring leaders in the development of socialized connections. Geographic dispersion hinders the creation of a shared environment and reduces opportunities for casual and unplanned dialogue, both of which are essential for the development of interpersonal bonds among team members. (Kiesler and Cummings, 2002; Joshi, Lazarova, and Liao, 2009) The larger the dispersion of the team, the bigger the problem. The difficulties of

managing a scattered workforce are frequently underestimated by management. Virtual teams, according to Cascio and Montealegre (2016), require more attention, not less.

To start to understand the challenges of dispersed teams and the very important role of leadership in such teams let us look into the example from research by Katzenbach and Smith, (2015). “One potential team of executives we encountered used a series of offsites to give it a promising start. They soon had an inspiring purpose, a set of specifically agreed-on performance goals, an approach that capitalized well on their complementary skills, and even the solid beginnings of mutual respect and trust. Regrettably, they assumed they could carry out their assignment with a minimum of meeting time. Yet, by reducing the time they spent together, they unwittingly diminished the mutual priority and clarity of the team's purpose and goals. They also eroded strong initial levels of trust and respect. Within six months, the individuals began interpreting the group's purpose in varying and conflicting ways. By then, unfortunately, they had lost their desire to get together to learn from their differences. What had begun as a potentially powerful team ended as a pseudo-team that eventually had to be completely reformed. “ (Katzenbach and Smith, 2015, p.126) Because of the nature of virtual work, remote employees may believe they would be isolated. They are, admittedly, working far away from their group leader. In close proximity, however, this is not the case. As a result, proximal workers respond emotionally and negatively when they feel separated from their team leader. Another cause might be more directly related to employee identification with the leader, especially the attributions given to the leader. Employees may not hold the boss responsible for their sense of isolation when working at a distance. They may just believe it is the nature of remote employment. On the other hand, employees may blame the leader for creating the conditions that led to their isolation in proximal environments when leaders are physically present with their team members. (Connaughton and Daly, 2004)

Some of these issues have been identified in previous studies. For one thing, a leader's "social presence" spanning time and space may be more difficult to accomplish (Warkentin, Sayeed, and Hightower, 1997). Furthermore, trust between leaders and team members can be quick but fleeting (Järvenpää, Knoll, and Leidner, 1998), and members' identification with the team, organization, and leader might be questioned as time passes.

Research by Järvenpää, Knoll, and Leidner (1998) emphasizes the role of trust in virtual teams, which is deeply influenced by cultural factors. Trust can be quick to develop but fragile over time, and culture plays a vital role in determining the level of trust within dispersed teams. Leading such teams involves managing individuals across diverse locations, cultures, and time zones, overseeing a wide span of control, and navigating new communication boundaries

(Nydegger and Nydegger, 2010; D'Souza and Colarelli, 2010; Leren, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of virtual work practices (Mutha and Srivastava, 2021), emphasizing the need for leadership behaviors that drive effective virtual team performance (Brown, Hill, and Lorinkova, 2021).

Despite the wealth of leadership literature, it's important to note that not all of it comfortably applies to the unique context of distant virtual teams (Hooijberg, Hunt, and Dodge, 1997, p. 375). While there are numerous theories and research on leadership in traditional team settings, research on leadership in virtual teams is limited (Kayworth and Leidner, 2002). This gap in research extends to collocated teams, cross-functional teams, and virtual teams (Alnuaimi, Robert, and Maruping, 2010; Bell and Kozlowski, 2002; Blaskovich, 2008). Consequently, researchers in the virtual team domain recognize leadership as a critical element in addressing the specific challenges arising from virtual collaboration (Bell, McAlpine, and Hill, 2019; Brown, Hill, and Lorinkova, 2021).

4.1.2 Challenges of Leading Cross-Cultural Teams

Research focused on promoting collaboration among managers and employees from diverse cultural backgrounds and their efforts to comprehend both commonalities and distinctions have experienced significant growth (Smith et al., 2013). Diversity in values, norms, and work ethics across cultures can result in contradictory expectations and behaviors within a team, affecting decision-making, conflict resolution, and time management (Sorge and Hofstede, 1983). Cultural diversity holds even greater significance and relevance in international organizations that transcend national boundaries in terms of their operations. Recent research has notably focused on understanding the dimensions of values in the business context and the imperative to effectively manage cultural diversity within organizational structures (Aytemiz Seymen, 2006).

In a comparative study between collocated and distributed teams, Mortensen and Hinds (2001) found that distributed teams exhibited greater cultural diversity compared to collocated teams. This diversity has been linked to increased levels of task and affective conflict (O'Reilly, Williams, and Barsade, 1998; Pelled, 1996) due to the diverse perspectives and work approaches it fosters, as well as the differing attitudes, beliefs, and expectations it generates. William's, Barsade's, and O'Reilly's review (1998) further supports this, concluding that over

four decades of research indicate that diverse groups tend to be less integrated, exhibit reduced communication, and experience greater conflict (Hinds and Bailey, 2003).

Furthermore, culture significantly influences how dispersed teams operate, affecting communication, collaboration, and team dynamics (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016). Cross-cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings, conflict, and reduced team cohesion (Majchrzak, Malhotra, and John, 2005; Zaccaro and Bader, 2003). According to Minkov and Hofstede (2011), culture shapes leadership expectations and preferences, impacting how leaders are perceived and accepted by team members. In collectivist cultures, leaders might be expected to prioritize group harmony, while in individualistic cultures, leaders may be encouraged to promote individual achievement (Smith and Blanck, 2002).

Considering the importance of culture in the success of dispersed teams, understanding and addressing cultural barriers, including language, habits, and communication norms, becomes a critical component of global teamwork (Hofstede, 2011). Dr. Geert Hofstede, a psychologist, introduced his cultural dimensions model in the late 1970s, which has since become a widely accepted framework for recognizing cultural distinctions. These cultural dimensions highlight unique preferences that distinguish one country's approach from another's, making it essential for effective cross-cultural interactions. Leaders of globally dispersed teams must grasp these fundamental cultural differences to adapt their actions and leadership styles appropriately.

1) Power distance index (PDI)

This index refers to the level of inequality that is tolerated between persons in positions of power and those without power. The fundamental problem here is how a society handles social inequality. Individuals in a society with a high PDI accept a hierarchical order in which everyone has a place, but people in societies with a low PDI do not, and seek a reason for power inequities. (Hofstede, 2011) A low PDI score indicates that power is shared and widely distributed and that society members do not accept unequal distribution of power. On the other hand, a high PDI number implies that society supports and accepts an unequal, hierarchical power distribution and that people are aware of their position within the system.

Implications for leaders: According to the concept, team members from cultures with a high PDI nation like Malaysia (100) “...will not initiate any action, and they like to be guided and directed to complete a task. If a manager doesn't take charge, they may think that the task isn't important.” (Country comparison tool, 2023)

2) **Individualism vs. collectivism (IDV)**

“Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010, p.92) In other words, this IDV index refers to how strong a bond one’s culture has and how strong the ties within the communities.

Implications for leaders: For example countries with a low IDV index marketing campaign emphasizing communal advantages, would certainly be understood and well accepted as long as the individuals feel like they are part of the same group. Acknowledge individual accomplishments. Recommendation based on this division for a leader leading team members coming from high IDV cultures would be to not mix work life with social life too much and encourage debate and expression of people's own ideas. On the other hand, low IDV cultures are characterized by suppressing feelings and emotions that may endanger harmony, avoiding giving negative feedback in public etc. (Country comparison tool, 2023)

3) **Masculinity vs. femininity (MAS)**

Differences in cognitive programming between cultures in this aspect are social, but they are also emotional. External causes might impose social roles, but people's feelings about them come from within. According to research, women's values change less from society to society than men's values. Men's values vary greatly from nation to nation, ranging from highly forceful and competitive, and so maximum distinct from women's values, to humble and compassionate, and thus comparable to women's values. The forceful pole has been labeled as "masculine," whereas the humble, compassionate pole has been labeled as "feminine." In feminine nations, women share the same modest, caring values as men; in masculine countries, women are forceful and competitive, but not to the same extent as men, indicating a divide between men's and women's values. (Hofstede, 2011)

Implications for leaders: If a leader is working with people from a country with a high MAS index they should understand that they are coming from a hierarchical, deferential, and traditionally patriarchal society. Long hours are the norm. And this can make it harder for female team members to gain advancement, due to family commitments. (Country comparison tool, 2023)

4) Uncertainty avoidance index (UIA)

This dimension describes how well people can cope with anxiety, or “... level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 8) It shows how much society has conditioned its people to feel uncomfortable or at ease in unstructured settings. Unstructured circumstances are unique, unfamiliar, startling, and out of the ordinary. Uncertainty-averse civilizations aim to prevent such scenarios by enforcing strong behavioral standards, regulations, and rules, disapproving of aberrant views, and believing in the ultimate truth “...there can only be one truth, and we have it.” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10)

Implications for leaders: When working with employees coming from high UIA cultures and countries such as Greece it is very important to recognize unspoken "rules" or cultural expectations you need to learn. As well as Recognize that emotion, anger, and vigorous hand gestures may simply be part of the conversation. On the other hand, when working in low UIA countries leaders should avoid "showing off" expertise or experience. Titles are also less significant. (Country comparison tool, 2023)

5) Long-term orientation vs. short-term normative orientation

“Long-term orientation stands for the fostering of pragmatic virtues oriented toward future rewards, in particular perseverance, thrift, and adapting to changing circumstances.” (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010, p. 519) “Short-term orientation stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, such as national, respect for tradition, preservation of face, and fulfilling social obligations.” (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010, p. 521-522)

Implications for leaders: Members of long-term-oriented cultures would expect their leaders to behave in a modest way while avoiding talking about themselves too much. These people are more willing to compromise, yet this may not always be clear to outsiders. Consequently, employees from short-term orientation countries are less willing to compromise as this would be seen as a weakness. (Country comparison tool, 2023)

6) Indulgence vs. restraint (IVR)

This last cultural dimension based on Hofstede’s research is “related to the gratification versus control of basic human desires related to enjoying life.” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 8) Indulgence refers to a tendency to enable relatively unrestricted indulgence of basic and inherent human wants for pleasure and enjoyment of life. Restraint, on the other hand, expresses a belief that such enjoyment should be limited and restricted by rigorous societal

rules. Indulgence vs. restraint is a cultural dimension based on well-defined study items that assess extremely specific occurrences.

Implications for leaders: Leaders in communication with team members coming from high-indulgence communities should prioritize feedback, coaching, and mentoring, and emphasize flexible working and better work-life balance. In opposition avoid making jokes when engaged in formal sessions with members from restrained cultures and instead opt for just being professional. (Muethel and Hoegl, 2010)

4.1.3 Challenges of Working From Home

Teleworking often referred to as "homeworking," originally denoted work conducted outside the traditional office, typically from home (Baruch, 2000). Historically, pre-industrial workers operated from home or nearby locations like craft workshops and local lands. The Industrial Revolution shifted work to centralized workplaces like factories and offices. Today, teleworking reflects the evolving nature of work. Today, it necessitates self-organization, independence, and a supportive remote work environment. Factors driving this change include digitization, connectivity, globalization, and demographic shifts (Bergman, 2019). Nonetheless, the success of this new working model, working from home, requires more than just technological advancements and internet access. (Helmold, 2020)

The challenges of working from home overlap with those of dispersed teams, although certain difficulties are more pronounced in the context of remote work. One of the primary challenges of working from home is maintaining productivity and self-discipline. The absence of direct supervision can lead to distractions, reduced accountability, and procrastination (Golden and Gajendran, 2018). A study by Bloom et al. (2014) found that employees working from home tend to work longer hours but may not necessarily be more productive. A study by Gajendran and Harrison (2007) suggests that remote workers may feel socially disconnected from their team, potentially impacting job satisfaction and mental health. While isolation and loneliness are common challenges in virtual or dispersed teams, they can be more acute for work-from-home (WFH) employees who lack face-to-face interactions with colleagues (Hertel et al., 2020).

Establishing clear work-life boundaries can be difficult when working from home. Employees may find it challenging to "switch off" from work, leading to burnout (Elst *et al.*, 2017). Maintaining work-life balance becomes more complex in a telework environment. While telecommuting offers the promise of increased flexibility, it can also lead to the

"always-on" syndrome, where employees feel compelled to remain constantly available (Rudolph et al., 2021). This continuous connectivity can erode personal time and exacerbate work-related stress. A study by Liao et al. (2019) highlights the importance of boundary management strategies in maintaining work-life balance. While the challenge of work-life balance exists for virtual or dispersed teams, it can be exacerbated for WFH employees who struggle to separate their professional and personal lives due to the physical proximity of their workspace (Park, Fritz, and Jex, 2015).

Additionally, the successful implementation of telework relies heavily on the effective use of technology. This challenge is consistent for both homeworking and dispersed teams. Technical challenges, such as connectivity issues, inadequate hardware or software, and cybersecurity concerns, can hinder productivity and create frustration for teleworkers (Bentley et al., 2016; Messenger and Gschwind, 2016).

4.2 How to overcome challenges of dispersed teams

The next chapter of the literature review will delve into various strategies and methods proposed by existing literature to address the challenges faced by cross-cultural dispersed teams working from home and facilitate their effective functioning.

4.2.1 Behavioral characteristics for successful distant leadership

In a literature review of this research paper a few important attributes of distant leadership needed for leading dispersed teams appeared during the coding stage of reviewing the literature which will be defined and explained in the following chapter.

4.2.1.1 Trust

Effective leadership communication and team engagement are underscored by the establishment of trust among team members (Mutha and Srivastava, 2021). The challenges of maintaining trust are amplified in divided teams, especially when compounded by cultural, political, and linguistic differences (Smith and Blanck, 2002). These hurdles can hinder open

problem-solving and idea-sharing, resulting in unproductive meetings and reduced creativity, particularly in dispersed teams (Smith and Blanck, 2002).

Trust's role in motivating active participation in the workplace is vital, albeit challenging to establish in remote settings. Virtual team leaders must ensure equitable treatment for all members, regardless of their backgrounds. This research highlights the relevance of traditional team performance factors to remote teams and the need for additional time, effort, and clear guidance from leaders and team members (Åbelțița and Rizhamadze, 2021). Järvenpää, Knoll, and Leidner, (1998) describe virtual team trust as depersonalized, focusing on work-related factors and cognitive forms of trust, reflecting perceived reliability, integrity, honesty, and justice. Joshi, Lazarova, and Liao (2009) offer further insights.

Effective communication and fostering enthusiasm are key to building trust among virtual team members (Järvenpää and Leidner, 1999). Leaders can enhance trust by setting clear communication guidelines to monitor progress and reinvigorate team members (Malhotra, Majchrzak and Rosen, 2007). Inspiring team members to work toward shared objectives, fostering enthusiasm, and promoting optimism are integral facets of inspirational leadership (Joshi, Lazarova, and Liao, 2009; Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014; Hambley et al., 2007; Brown, Hill, and Lorinkova, 2021).

4.2.1.2 Open Communication

Trust among team members may be fostered by leaders who are able to facilitate open communication, treat employees fairly and with respect, value the work that their teams do, and empower team members. (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002)

Effective communication is a fundamental component for teams to work together in today's information-rich world (Penle and Hawkins, 1985). This is especially true in dispersed teams, where physical contact among team members and with their leader is restrained, or missing whatsoever. Leaders' influence and motivation, as well as communication and trust amongst team members, become the primary ways of leading successfully in geographically distributed teams. In virtual teams, the lack of proximity and face-to-face dialogues adds to the complexity of these drivers, potentially changing the engagement equation. On the other hand, it might be very helpful when recruiting managers, for companies to look for employees with strong leadership and communication abilities. Organizations may establish a favorable climate to build healthy and trustworthy relationships among coworkers by recognizing the importance

of "trust" for employees working in virtual teams. These findings of a study by Mutha and Srivastava (2021) might be useful for hybrid working mode as well, given the present pandemic scenario throughout the world, when people are working online and have numerous inhibitions to return to work. (Mutha and Srivastava, 2021)

4.2.1.3 Cultural Competency

Cultural competency stands as a cornerstone of a global mindset, offering the key to unlocking opportunities on the global stage (Cvitkovich, Gundling and Caldwell, 2015). At its core, cultural competency commences with the crucial aspect of cultural awareness. Leaders must embark on a journey to uncover their own cultural biases, beliefs, and values, recognizing the profound influence of these factors on their perceptions and interactions with others (Landis, Bennett and Bennett, 2004). Concurrently, leaders must engage in the acquisition of knowledge about the diverse cultures they encounter. This encompasses gaining insights into the customs, traditions, communication styles, and social norms of these cultures (Brislin, 1981). Furthermore, it entails embracing shared insights and those enlightening "aha moments" that catalyze higher levels of performance (Cvitkovich, Gundling and Caldwell, 2015). In addition to cultural proficiency, the global mindset necessitates vigilant monitoring of economic, geopolitical, and technological transformations within our rapidly evolving world. Leaders must adopt a proactive stance, anticipating and harnessing emerging trends to drive innovation, inspire their teams, and strategically position their organizations in a continuously shifting global landscape where borders are continually redefined (Cvitkovich, Gundling and Caldwell, 2015). Cultural competence extends to the domain of effective communication and collaboration with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. This skill set encompasses active listening, proficiency in cross-cultural communication, and the mastery of conflict resolution strategies (Bhawuk, 1998).

In the contemporary global reality, a high degree of cultural competence serves as an indispensable foundation for navigating a mosaic of value systems and cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, behavioral adaptation empowers leaders to seamlessly adjust their conduct and strategies to align with various cultural contexts. This competency enables leaders to act in culturally appropriate ways, enhancing overall performance, learning, and personal growth among employees from diverse backgrounds. Insufficient knowledge about working with individuals from different cultures can lead to costly and predictable negative consequences, such as missed deadlines, quality issues, customer alienation, business lost to competitors,

wasted time, mutual frustration, diminished trust, damage to personal and corporate reputations, and disengagement among local employees (Cvitkovich, Gundling and Caldwell, 2015). Furthermore, research in the fields of cross-cultural leadership and international management underscores the importance of expatriate managers adjusting their leadership behaviors to effectively lead foreign subsidiaries and motivate host country employees toward achieving organizational goals (Hofstede, 2011; House et al., 2013; Tsai, 2022).

4.2.2 Split Framework

Companies today recognize the need to have globally dispersed teams with diverse expertise and local market knowledge to thrive in the international market. Leveraging this international diversity, they assemble teams comprising individuals from various cultures with diverse work backgrounds and perspectives, enabling effective competition in the global market. To facilitate bridging the social distance between leaders and employees, a model was developed and tested. This model, part of the SPLIT framework, encompasses five components: structure, process, language, identity, and technology, each capable of influencing social distance. In the following paragraph, we will explore how these factors can contribute to team dysfunction, how leaders can address issues as they arise, and strategies for preventing such problems proactively.

1) Structure and the perception of power

“In the context of global teams, the structural factors determining social distance are the location and number of sites where team members are based and the number of employees who work at each site.” (Neeley, 2015, p.1) Power perceptions lead to "in-groups" and "out-groups" in the structure. Neeley (2015) offers the example of a corporation with the majority of workers in one nation and only a handful in another; personnel in the majority office will be viewed as having more influence. In both public and private businesses, I see this most commonly in the "we versus. them" mindset between corporate offices/headquarters and field offices. When the leader is at the site same location as the majority of the employees or the one closest to the corporate headquarters, the issue becomes much worse: team members at that site tend to overlook the needs and contributions of their colleagues in the other locations. “This dynamic can occur even when everyone is in the same country: The five people working in, say, Beijing may have a strong allegiance to one another and a habit of shutting out their two colleagues in

Shanghai.” (Neeley, 2015, p.1) And exactly this phenomenon can be a cause of the “us against them” notion. Based on Neeley (2015) a leader must communicate three critical messages to remedy perceived power inequalities between various groups: “Who we are” to strengthen the team’s single identity, “What we do” as a reminder of a shared common goal and purpose, and lastly “I am there for you” as frequent contact with the leader can make “all the difference in conveying that their contributions matter.” (Neeley, 2015, p.1)

2) Process and the importance of empathy

Empathy plays a crucial role in bridging the social distance between geographically distant team members (Neeley, 2015, p. 1). When colleagues have the opportunity to engage in informal discussions, whether about work-related matters or personal concerns, they are more likely to develop empathy. This, in turn, facilitates successful engagement in formal settings and fosters mutual understanding among remote coworkers. To promote empathy in global teams, leaders can introduce "deliberate moments" during virtual meetings.

"Feedback on routine interactions" is one such deliberate moment, where global team leaders and members actively seek "reflected knowledge" to understand how others perceive them, reducing mistrust stemming from communication gaps or misunderstandings.

"Unstructured time" is another essential element in building empathy. Engaging in unstructured conversations, such as sharing thoughts before official meetings or discussing casual topics like weather and family, fosters organic knowledge exchange, coordination, relationship development, and trust. Scheduling a brief period for light conversation before diving into business discussions during team meetings can be particularly effective. Team leaders can initiate these conversations, especially during initial encounters, to help team members become familiar with their distant peers. Encouraging team members to openly discuss obstacles they face outside of the project, even if unrelated to the agenda, can significantly enhance mutual trust and understanding within the group.

Additionally, leaders should embrace "Time to disagree" by encouraging discussions on both team tasks and the process of task execution (Neeley, 2015, p. 1). Framing these debates as brainstorming sessions can mitigate the risk of confrontational exchanges. To maintain a conducive environment for open dialogue, less experienced members should share their opinions first to prevent intimidation. Leaders can model effective inquiry techniques to delve into the core of the issues, allowing team members to contribute to agenda topics and offer suggestions (Neeley, 2015).

3) Language and the Fluency Gap

Effective communication among team members is pivotal for information sharing, decision-making, coordination, and overall performance (Neeley, 2015). However, in teams where members' native languages differ from the company language, varying fluency levels can present challenges. Addressing these differences typically involves implementing three communication guidelines during meetings:

"Dial down dominance": Proficient speakers are encouraged to speak at a slower pace, avoid idioms, slang, and cultural references, and actively seek confirmation that they have been understood by others.

"Dial-up engagement": Less proficient speakers should monitor their participation in meetings to ensure they are contributing effectively. In some cases, they may set goals for the number of comments they aim to make within a specific time frame (Neeley, 2015).

"Balance participation to ensure inclusion": Implementing these guidelines requires active leadership. Leaders of global teams must track participation levels, actively engage less proficient speakers, and may need to encourage dominant-language speakers to be more considerate, allowing the views and perspectives of less proficient speakers to be heard (Neeley, 2015).

Language and culture share a complex relationship, as they are intricately intertwined. While the precise nature of this relationship is a subject of debate, it is evident that language and culture are inseparable. A specific language often signifies a distinct group of people, and when communicating in another language, individuals also engage with the culture of its speakers. The language used inherently carries cultural elements and influences how messages are perceived and understood (Neeley, 2015).

4) Identity and the mismatch of perceptions

Only when members of global teams understand where their colleagues are coming from, things run more smoothly. Deciphering someone's identity and establishing a connection, on the other hand, is far from straightforward. Age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, employment, political affiliations, and so on are all factors that people use to identify themselves. "...someone in North America who looks you squarely in the eye may project confidence and honesty, but in other parts of the world, direct eye contact might be perceived as rude or threatening." (Neeley, 2015, p.1) Misunderstandings like these are a major source of

social distance and distrust, and global team leaders have to raise everyone's awareness of them. This involves mutual learning and teaching. (Neeley, 2015)

5) Technology

Team members quickly adopt the leader's communication technology choice. Leaders who promote videoconferencing should use it themselves. If she wants her team to talk, she must use the phone often. She must set an example if she wants her staff to respond quickly to emails. (Neeley, 2015) Finally, leaders must understand technology to make smart decisions. Which technology is most likely to reduce meeting social distance? It usually allows the most nonverbal communication, like video teleconferencing, but in conditions of severe emotional conflict, it may imply the opposite. We must accept discomfort to master technology. Managers should behave this way to inspire their team. (Neeley, 2015)

4.3 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework introduced in this paper stems from a comprehensive literature review, specifically concentrating on the challenges encountered by dispersed cross-cultural teams working remotely from home. Throughout the literature review, several key aspects emerged as particularly prominent in discussions on this topic. These aspects include trust, openness in communication, and the utilization of technology tools, but also company culture. It's noteworthy that the concept of trust in this research encompasses not only trust itself but also incorporates honesty in communication and transparency, as these components were found to be closely interconnected.

As a result of this comprehensive review, a diagram has been developed to illustrate the various factors that can impact the functioning of dispersed cross-cultural teams in a remote working environment. This diagram serves as a visual representation of the interplay between these critical aspects and provides a structured framework for understanding the complexities of leading and managing such teams effectively. The diagram is presented below:

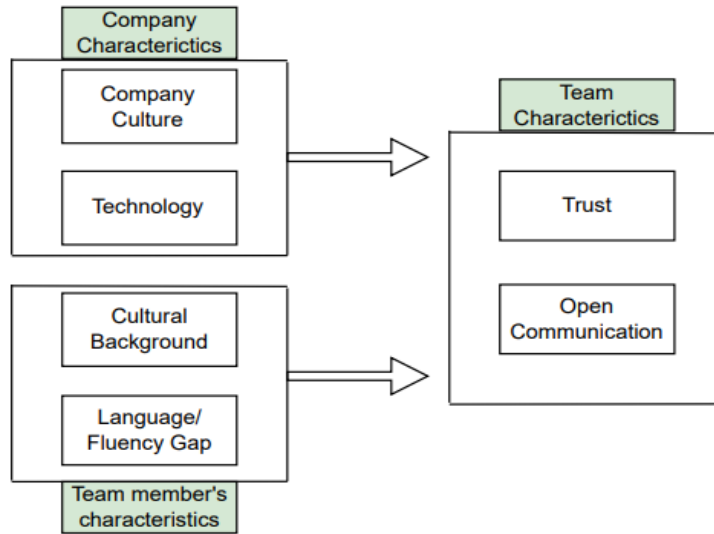


Fig. 1: Aspects affecting work in cross-cultural dispersed teams (Own design)

This conceptual framework will guide the subsequent discussions and analyses in this paper, offering a structured approach to exploring the challenges faced by dispersed cross-cultural teams and the strategies employed to overcome them. It underscores the multifaceted nature of these challenges and highlights the interdependence of trust, communication, and technology in achieving successful team dynamics in a remote work setting.

It is imperative to emphasize that the conceptual framework presented here is not intended to be exhaustive. Given the intricate and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by dispersed cross-cultural teams in a remote work environment, the framework has been intentionally simplified to provide a structured foundation for analysis and discussion.

This framework draws inspiration from and is constructed based on previously developed matrices and models, which offer a more detailed breakdown of the various factors and dynamics involved in managing such teams effectively. These additional matrices and models can be found in the appendix (Fig. 3 - Fig. 8), providing a more in-depth exploration of specific elements within the overarching framework.

The purpose of this conceptual framework is to offer a high-level overview and a starting point for examining the complexities of leading dispersed cross-cultural teams in a remote work context. It provides a structured lens through which to analyze the challenges and potential solutions discussed in this paper, recognizing that the complete landscape of this issue extends beyond the scope of this simplified representation.

5. Philosophy of science

This chapter examines the philosophical foundations that shaped this thesis's methodology, analysis, and interpretation. Philosophy of science gives us a way to look at the foundations of our study with a critical eye (Laudan, 1981). It forces us to think about the things we take for granted, the ways we think, and the limits of what we know. By doing this, the researcher hopes to not only add to the growing amount of literature on remote work but also help people learn more about the philosophical aspects of scientific research. As we start this intellectual journey, we will go through the philosophical landscapes that have shaped the very nature of scientific research. Philosophers and scholars who have thought about questions of epistemology, ontology, and the structure of scientific truth (Lakatos, 1970) will help us learn more about what we are looking for. Through this philosophical journey, the researcher hopes to untangle the web of knowledge and light the way to a better understanding of leadership and teamwork in dispersed work settings.

5.1 Research paradigm

The interpretative approach will play a significant role in this research endeavor. The interpretative paradigm is an approach to increasing one's level of comprehension by focusing on the discovery of meanings. (Neill, 2006) Interpretivism, which is being used as a perspective in this research paper, is a philosophical approach that places an emphasis on the individuality and uniqueness of each person's life experience. (Neill, 2006) This tactic is built on the idea that human behavior cannot be reduced to straightforward cause-and-effect links but rather has to be comprehended within the framework of its cultural and historical context in order to be properly understood.

According to Jonker and Pennink (2009), in order for researchers to successfully carry out qualitative research, they need to keep a number of essential mindsets in mind. The researcher will make an effort to "see things from someone else's perspective". To this extent, a researcher would choose an interpretative paradigm as the major paradigm for the purpose of developing pertinent understandings of the settings of leadership difficulties in remote teams. This would be the case if the researcher were to select a paradigm. The interpretive paradigm

makes an effort to comprehend the world in both its "as it is" state and in the way that the humans being investigated see it in their own minds. According to Burrell and Morgan (2019), the goal of this approach is to understand the fundamental character of the socially generated reality at the level of one's own subjective experience.

5.2. Ontology

“Ontology, in general, relates to the assumptions we hold about reality – whether it is external or a construct of our mind. Knowledge can be attributed in part to being in the possession of people and at the same time a result of interactions. Since people cannot really define what they know in a specific field or regarding a particular topic it is only in interactions that they demonstrate and create knowledge. This complex phenomenon describes the social construction of knowledge.” (Jonker and Pennink, 2009, p. 61) Ontology, in other words, is the study of reality itself, and it asks such fundamental issues as, "What is reality, and what can we learn about it?" (Burrell and Morgan, 2019)

“The ontological position of interpretivism is relativism. Relativism is the view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person.” (Guba, Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). “Reality is individually constructed; there are as many realities as individuals. Language does not passively label objects but actively shapes and molds reality.” (Frowe, 2001, p. 185) According to this ontology, knowledge is not seen as an objective reality that can be uncovered through empirical observation or scientific research; rather, it is seen as a social construct that emerges from human interaction and interpretation. Those two things are what make up knowledge, according to this ontology. This indicates that the researcher does not presuppose that there is a singular, objective reality that can be observed and quantified, but rather understands that reality is subjective and socially constructed. This is significant because it shows that the researcher is not interested in establishing a single, objective reality.

As was said before, the interpretative paradigm proposes that reality is made up of a person's mental conceptions of the things with which that person interacts and that this interaction has an influence not just on the observer but also on the scene that is being observed (Ponterotto, 2005). Reality is intangible, internal, multiple, and manufactured (the relativist position), in addition to being subjective and impacted by the context of the circumstance, the individual's experiences and opinions, the social environment, and the individual's relationship with the researcher. (Ponterotto, 2005).

In addition to this, the ontology acknowledges the possibility that separate individuals and groups may hold contrasting perspectives regarding the nature of reality and that these perspectives are shaped by a wide range of social, cultural, and historical factors. Therefore, the researcher accepts that there is not a single "correct" perspective of reality, but rather that there are multiple readings that are equally acceptable, depending on the individual or group that is being considered.

5.3 Epistemology

Epistemology, the study of obtaining information and understanding reality from external sources, is closely tied to ontology. In interpretivist thinking, knowledge is created through individuals' subjective experiences in specific social and cultural contexts, emphasizing the importance of understanding how people interpret the world (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). This investigation adopts an interpretivist epistemology, acknowledging that knowledge is shaped by individual perspectives. Interpretivism underscores the significance of comprehending how individuals interpret and make sense of their surroundings (Alasuutari, 2010)

Every paradigm has its own set of ontological and epistemological premises. The intellectual underpinnings of any paradigm can never be experimentally confirmed or disproven because all assumptions are guesswork. Diverse paradigms are based on different ontological and epistemological perspectives, and as a result, they have different assumptions about reality and knowledge that drive their study methods. This is apparent in their research techniques and methodologies.

According to Alasuutari (2010), the interpretivist/relativist paradigm views knowledge not as an objective reality that can be discovered through empirical observation or scientific research, but rather as a social construct that evolves from human interaction and interpretation. This is in contrast to the traditional positivist paradigm, which views knowledge as an objective reality that can be discovered through empirical observation or scientific investigation. This indicates that the researcher does not presuppose that there is a singular, objective reality that can be observed and quantified, but rather understands that reality is subjective and socially constructed. This is significant because it shows that the researcher is not interested in establishing a single, objective reality.

6. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences and perspectives of a specific instance of interest, and this chapter provides a detailed account of the technique that was used in this study to accomplish so. In particular, this research utilized a methodology known as a single case study, (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) and it took a holistic approach in order to analyze the multiple dimensions and interdependencies of the case that was being looked into. A single case study with a holistic approach involves an in-depth investigation of a single, often complex, and unique case to gain a comprehensive understanding (Yin, 2014). Unlike studies with multiple cases, this method focuses on exploring all dimensions of the case, considering various data types and contextual factors (Baxter and Jack, 2008). The researcher employs qualitative and quantitative data, interviews, observations, and documents to provide a rich and contextually grounded description of the case (Stake, 1995). This approach is valuable for deeply understanding intricate phenomena, such as organizational behavior or individual experiences (Stake, 2005).

The objective of gaining an all-encompassing understanding of a difficult and unique phenomenon, such as the case that is being considered, was a primary factor in the decision to choose a design that focuses on a single case study. According to Yin (2014), the strategy of using a single case study is particularly useful in situations in which the phenomenon being investigated is singular or intricate and calls for research that is exhaustive and in-depth. In addition, Yin (2014) argues that the technique of a single case study may offer an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the examined phenomena since it enables the examination of the many facets and connections of the case. In this case, the approach aligns with the study's goal of offering an in-depth exploration within a specific organizational context. Comparative or multi-case studies, while valuable, weren't suitable for this research due to the phenomenon's uniqueness and complexity. A single case study allows for a deep dive into the intricacies of the specific case, enhancing contextual understanding (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). In conclusion, the single case study method was chosen to provide a contextually rich exploration of the unique phenomenon, guided by Eisenhardt's insights (1989). This approach aims to contribute valuable insights to the organizational knowledge base.

Semi-structured interviews were picked as the primary data-gathering approach due to its flexibility and exploratory character (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), semi-structured interviews are particularly useful when the subjective

experiences and opinions of people are the focus of the study. This is because semi-structured interviews make it possible to acquire rich and detailed data on the aspects in question. This method collected detailed participant experiences and opinions. Semi-structured interviews combine structured and unstructured aspects. These interviews follow a general outline or series of questions yet allow the interviewer to go further into individual themes (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner, 2007). This method encourages unstructured discourse so people can share their thoughts, experiences, and opinions. Structured interviews, when all participants answered the same questions in the same order, may have decreased response depth and spontaneity (Babbie, 2016). Using structured interviews instead of semi-structured interviews in my research paper would have certain impacts on the study design and the data collected. Structured interviews enable uniformity and data comparison, while semi-structured interviews might reveal subtle or surprising insights.

The following chapter provides a detailed overview of the methods that were used in this study. The purpose of this study was to analyze the experiences and perspectives of a single case of interest using a holistic approach and semi-structured interviews.

6.1 Research Method

In this chapter, we navigate through the intricacies of data collection, exploring the rationale behind the chosen methods and the ethical considerations that guide our approach (Bryman, 2010; Creswell, 1994). The data collection process is not merely a technical task; it is an intellectual journey that demands a deep appreciation of the intricacies of remote work, leadership, and teamwork. The researcher shall employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to uncover the multifaceted facets of dispersed team dynamics, drawing upon established frameworks and innovative techniques (Bamberger and Meshoulam, 2014; Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam, 2009). Our exploration is underpinned by the recognition that the efficacy of data collection directly influences the robustness and validity of subsequent analyses (Bryman, 2010). Therefore, it is our commitment to rigorously adhere to established protocols while remaining open to the ever-evolving nature of the remote work landscape in cross-cultural dispersed teams (Creswell, 1994). Through this data collection process, we endeavor to illuminate the uncharted territories of leadership and teamwork in dispersed teams, contributing valuable insights to the broader field of organizational research.

6.2 Data Collection Methods

Effective data collection is a cornerstone of empirical research, underpinning the credibility and validity of findings. This chapter delves into the intricacies of data collection within the context of a study exploring the dynamics of cross-cultural dispersed teams. This study aims to unveil the intricacies of trust-building, communication, leadership, and other vital elements that underpin effective teamwork in dispersed environments. To ensure the ethical conduct of this research, informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained, and data was anonymized (only used the first name of the interviewee). In the following chapter, the research will provide a detailed description of the data collection methods employed in this study, introducing the approaches used to gather and compile the qualitative data.

Initial contact was established with potential participants to ascertain their interest and availability for participation. While not all approached team members were able to participate due to various constraints, consent was obtained from five team members and one team lead who agreed to contribute to the study. Given the geographically dispersed nature of the team, online interviews were conducted to facilitate data collection. This method was chosen to accommodate the diverse locations of the participants, acknowledging the convenience and flexibility that online interviews offer (Bryman, 2010). Confidentiality emerged as a paramount concern during the research process. To address this, participants were provided with assurances regarding the privacy and anonymity of the information they shared. They were explicitly informed about the protective measures in place to safeguard their identities and contributions to the study (Merriam, 2009).

An important consideration in this study was the language in which the interviews were conducted. To create a comfortable and conducive environment for participants to express their thoughts and experiences, interviews with team members were conducted in their native languages (Patton, 2015). This choice aimed to mitigate language barriers and facilitate more authentic and nuanced responses. Subsequently, the interview transcripts were meticulously translated into English, ensuring both accuracy and the preservation of the participants' voices and expressions (Gibbs, 2018). Importantly, participants were actively involved in the translation process, with the opportunity to review and approve the translated content. This collaborative approach further reinforced their agency and commitment to the research (Creswell, 1994).

6.2.1 Qualitative Interview

"Qualitative interviews are vital in social science research for their ability to delve into individuals' experiences and perspectives (Edwards and Holland, 2013). This chapter outlines qualitative interviews, and their key characteristics, for gathering rich qualitative data. These interviews involve dialogues between researchers and participants, aiming to uncover personal interpretations and subjective insights (Rubin and Rubin, 2011). The spectrum of qualitative interviews ranges from highly structured to flexible, with structured interviews aligning with survey methods and semi-structured/unstructured interviews characterizing qualitative research (Edwards and Holland, 2013)."

Regardless of the type of qualitative interview, data analysis involves a systematic process of organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the collected interview data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Techniques such as thematic analysis, content analysis, and constant comparison are commonly used to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within the data. Qualitative interviews are a great way to learn about people's lives and points of view. When researcher know the differences between structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews, they can choose the best method for their study goals.(Edwards and Holland, 2013)

For this study, the researcher has decided to use semi-structured interviews as the main way to get information, as was mentioned above. Edwards and Holland (2013) say that semi-structured interviews are a good mix of flexibility and structure because they allow for a deeper look at the experiences and viewpoints of participants while keeping some level of consistency across interviews. Additionally, semi-structured interviews allow participants to express themselves freely and provide detailed insights, enriching the study's understanding of the topic. (Edwards and Holland, 2013) These interviews uncover the social, cultural, and situational factors influencing participants' views, making them valuable for complex subjects. Semi-structured interviews empower participants to share their thoughts and feelings, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration that enhances data validity. Researchers can ask consistent questions across interviews, enabling the identification of patterns, similarities, and differences among participants, leading to comprehensive data analysis. (Edwards and Holland, 2013)

The choice of semi-structured interviews is in line with the research goals, which are to learn about the participants' different perspectives and experiences with the leader, and her leadership style, therefore was most suitable for the topic as a means of research. This method makes sure that there is a deep knowledge of the research topic and makes it possible to make

meaningful comparisons between participants. In the end, this adds to the depth and reliability of the research results.

6.2.1.1 Interview design

Based on a comprehensive literature review, the researcher identified six recurring areas that consistently emerged when examining the impact of leadership styles on team effectiveness. These areas served as the foundation for developing our conceptual framework (see Fig.2) and formed the basis for constructing the semi-structured interview questions. While the specific questions varied depending on the ongoing discussion and individual interviewees, the primary focus remained consistent. The objective was to gain insights into the interviewee's perspective of working in cross-cultural dispersed teams to describe the current state of their team and give them the perspective of their leader's views. Additionally, the research aimed to understand the level of leader involvement in the specific areas of inquiry and the resulting outcomes. This approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play within different teams and provided an opportunity to explore the role of the leader in influencing outcomes in specific aspects. Through these semi-structured interviews, we sought to capture the interviewees' perspectives, delve into the intricacies of their team dynamics, and shed light on the leadership practices that contribute to or hinder team effectiveness in the identified areas. As mentioned by Merriam (2009) there is no specific order in which questions are asked in an interview and is not governed by any strict rules, the order of asked questions was changed depending on the answers.

6.3 Coding and Data Analysis

The process of coding and thematic analysis represents a vital phase in the research journey, where the rich tapestry of qualitative data collected from interviews with team members and leaders begins to unfold. This chapter is underpinned by the recognition that effective coding and thematic analysis are essential for generating meaningful insights into the complexities of leadership, communication, and teamwork within dispersed teams.

"Coding is a systematic, interpretable process of summarizing data into fewer categories or themes that can convey the original data" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 3).

The application of coding and thematic analysis in this research is driven by a commitment to comprehensively explore the nuances of leadership styles, communication patterns, and team dynamics within geographically dispersed teams. By coding interview transcripts and identifying recurring themes, the research can shed light on the multifaceted factors that influence trust-building, open communication, language dynamics, and other crucial aspects of team collaboration in remote work settings.

The integration of coding and thematic analysis enables the transformation of qualitative data into a coherent narrative that elucidates the experiences, challenges, and strategies adopted by team members and leaders. By doing so, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms at play within dispersed teams, offering valuable insights for both academia and practitioners seeking to navigate the evolving landscape of remote work. "Thematic analysis provides a theoretically flexible and useful research tool that can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

As we embark on this coding journey, it is imperative to adhere to established methodologies, drawing inspiration from the works of Saldaña (2015) and Braun and Clarke (2006) to ensure rigor and comprehensiveness in our analysis. Through a meticulous coding process, the researcher aimed to unearth the underlying themes that permeate the interviews, thereby contributing to a holistic understanding of the intricacies of leading and collaborating in the context of dispersed teams.

6.3.1 Coding Process

The initial coding phase in qualitative data analysis involves methodically assessing the dataset to comprehend its content (Saldaña, 2015). The researcher analyzed interview transcripts and textual documents, identifying and labeling key concepts, ideas, and words (Sandelowski, 2000), thus laying the foundation for coding and analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). This step provided a basic understanding of the data's scope, identified major subjects or patterns, and pinpointed areas requiring further investigation during initial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Active engagement with the data ensured a thorough examination of research issues (Saldaña, 2015), setting the framework for data organization and analysis.

In the second stage, line-by-line coding was employed to conduct a thorough examination of the data (Saldana, 2015). This approach involved the detailed analysis of each

line or data fragment, generating initial codes for meaningful information units. The purpose of this method was to capture the richness and contextual nuances within the data (Birks and Mills, 2023) by closely scrutinizing every word, phrase, and sentence (Saldana, 2015). This process transformed raw data into manageable, analyzable components (Saldana, 2015) and allowed the researcher to deeply engage with the data, gaining insights into participants' experiences, perspectives, and narratives (Birks and Mills, 2023), thereby laying the foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis.

During the final coding stage, the researcher implemented thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to systematically identify, analyze, and interpret themes within the coded data (Braun and Clarke, 2014). This phase involved examining coding links and aggregating codes into meaningful themes or patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014). The thematic analysis aimed to construct a narrative from the data (Riessman, 2008) by retrospectively reviewing data, codes, and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The selected themes aptly described the data and shed light on participants' experiences or the phenomena of interest (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach fostered critical thinking and interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2014), ensuring a clear and internally consistent narrative that addressed the study's objectives (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis exhibited flexibility, accommodating both deductive and inductive aspects (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) by incorporating predefined codes from the literature while remaining open to emerging codes (Braun and Clarke, 2014).

6.3.2 Thematic data analysis

"Thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis was used as a means of putting the collected data into perspective and making sense of it. This versatile qualitative research method allows for the systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of emerging patterns in textual or visual data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method's adaptability caters to both inductive and deductive approaches, depending on research objectives (Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas, 2013). Inductive approaches let themes emerge directly from the data, reflecting participants' experiences, while deductive approaches apply pre-existing theoretical frameworks to guide theme identification (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined the key steps in thematic analysis, which include data

familiarization, initial code generation, theme exploration, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production. The process begins with deep data immersion to gain a holistic understanding, followed by the generation of initial codes to identify conceptually related data segments. These segments are subsequently organized into potential themes, refined through review and definition, and ultimately, named and integrated into a coherent narrative or report.

The choice to employ thematic analysis in this research study is supported by several compelling reasons that align with the research objectives and the nature of the data collected. Thematic analysis is a widely recognized and versatile qualitative research method that offers specific advantages that make it well-suited for this investigation. Thematic analysis, a flexible and adaptable approach, is employed in this study to explore leadership practices in dispersed teams (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method accommodates the complexity of multifaceted research questions and diverse data types, including interviews with both team leaders and members. Thematic analysis allows for a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Its inductive nature aligns with the research's goal of capturing authentic participant experiences and perspectives, enabling the identification of underlying themes and patterns not easily discernible through other methods. Moreover, its accessibility and transparency make it suitable for researchers from diverse backgrounds (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

The clear steps involved in thematic analysis, such as data familiarization, coding, theme development, and reporting, enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the research process. This aligns with the research's commitment to producing reliable and credible findings. Thematic analysis is particularly well-suited for analyzing qualitative data, such as interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses (Nowell et al., 2017). As this study relies on interviews with leaders and team members, thematic analysis offers a systematic and rigorous method for uncovering key themes and patterns within the qualitative data.

The table below, resulting from thematic analysis, provides an overview of significant findings from interviews addressing the challenges of remote work within a dispersed, cross-cultural team. Additionally, on the right side of the table, the researcher acknowledges interviewees' perspectives on their leader's current leadership style, highlighting aspects they found helpful in overcoming challenges and identifying areas for potential improvement.

Name	Challenges of Working from home in a dispersed cross-cultural team	How to overcome challenges - likes and improvement suggestions of current leadership
Maria	Occasional technical difficulties Need to be mindful about means of delivery of the message Hesitancy to ask questions in remote setting Need to be more conscious about creating opportunities to connect with colleagues	Likes: clear guidance clear communication, understanding of private matters, Trustworthy Improvement suggestions: Too laid back leadership approach
Boris	Better connection to person with 121 communication Trust issues when lacking contact Lack of personal connection Czech colleagues more unhappy and tend to complain more Onboarding	Likes: “Buddy up” approach Freely express thoughts Improvement suggestions: Lack of firm authority in problem-solving
Veronika	Brainstorming more challenging in remote setting Internet connectivity issues Challenging onboarding online	Likes: Proactive approach towards problems Open communication Possibility to ask questions Open environment Flat hierarchy approach Improvement suggestions: Challenging for some to accept the level of ownership
Radoslav	Unable to meet colleagues in person Gets lonely Less informal talk with colleagues Slovaks more reserved when giving direct and strong feedback	Likes: Feeling heard Be able to speak up Collaborative atmosphere Transparency Promoting work-life balance Improvement suggestions: Stronger, more firm leadership in conflict resolution
Lucia	Technology challenges for older generation No connection with company culture	Likes: Feeling of belonging Clear communication of goals and expectations Possibility to speak up and talk openly Improvement suggestions: N/A
Agata	Challenges of leading dispersed cross-cultural team: Transparent and open communication Different productivity levels Trust	Open communication Honesty, Transparency Clear expectations Consistency Growing mindset Freedom to give a sense of ownership

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Interviews (Own design)

6.4 Validity, Reliability

In qualitative research, ensuring data validity and reliability is vital for maintaining credible findings. Validity measures how accurately a study captures its intended subject matter, while reliability concerns result in consistency. According to Brink (1993), various factors can threaten the validity and reliability of qualitative research, including the researcher, participants, social context, and data collection and analysis methods. Recognizing and addressing these threats is crucial for strengthening research findings. In this chapter, we'll delve into these threats and discuss strategies applied to enhance the validity and reliability of our study, particularly within the context of challenges faced by leaders in dispersed teams.

The researcher's role in qualitative research as the data collection instrument is crucial, and this can introduce bias and affect data reliability. The mere presence of the researcher can lead to reactive effects, where participants may alter their responses due to the researcher's presence (Leininger, 1991). To address this challenge and build trust for more reliable data, several measures were taken. Participants were provided with a clear understanding of the study's goals and benefits, emphasizing their importance in the research process. The interactions were conducted in a warm and caring manner to create a safe and comfortable environment. Active listening and genuine interest in participants' perspectives were demonstrated to build rapport and trust. Additionally, participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their thoughts and experiences. These strategies aimed to foster trust, encouraging participants to speak openly during interviews. It's important to note that all interviews were conducted online, which might have affected the level of trust due to the absence of face-to-face contact.

The social context in which data is obtained is essential in establishing the findings' reliability and validity. "Individuals may behave differently under differing social circumstances, for example, when alone with the researcher they may provide different information than when they are in a group, or patients may provide different information within the health care context than what they reveal in their home neighborhood." (Brink, 1993, p. 37) The researcher has explicitly defined the physical, social, and interpersonal contexts in which the data were collected. Paying special attention to privacy considerations, participants could have been hesitant to provide accurate responses if they fear being overheard by others in the environment, or fear a retribution by their leader.

A lack of clarity in presenting the research design poses a risk to the reliability and validity of the findings, as subsequent researchers may struggle to reconstruct the original strategies. To avoid being accused of producing invalid and unreliable findings, the researcher aimed to provide clear descriptions of the methods. This involved precisely identifying and thoroughly explaining all data collection strategies employed, as well as carefully documenting field notes in the context of the observed phenomena. By doing so, researcher enabled their peers to make valid judgments and contribute to the overall understanding of the subject matter. Addressing the potential risks associated with data collection, which involves the researcher, respondents, and social context, ensures a more robust research process. (Brink, 1993)

6.5 Limitation, Delimitation

The chapter Limitation and Delimitation in this master thesis addresses the research study's constraints and boundaries on leadership style as well as the issues faced by leaders in a remote work setting inside an insurance organization. This chapter fosters transparency and provides insights into the potential impact on the research findings by identifying the constraints and clearly describing the scope of the study.

This research study has certain limitations that must be noted. To begin with, the use of a single case study approach limits the generalizability of the findings because the study focuses on a single insurance firm. Whereas the choice to use a single case study can be viewed as delimitation, this approach offers some limitations of its own. However, the lessons gathered from this study can still be useful in similar circumstances and sectors.

Second, the use of semi-structured interviews as the major technique of data gathering involves possible restrictions. The interviewees' comments may be influenced by their subjective experiences and perceptions, which may affect the objectivity of the findings. However, several interviews were conducted to ensure a variety of perspectives from leaders and team members, which helped to minimize this constraint.

The delimitations of this research study establish the specific boundaries and extent of the examination. To begin, the emphasis is on the leadership style and the issues that leaders encounter in a remote work situation within an insurance organization. This enables a thorough investigation of the elements impacting effective collaboration and leadership in a distant situation within the insurance sector.

Furthermore, a holistic study methodology is used, taking into account the interdependence of numerous elements influencing leadership effectiveness in a remote work setting. This method allows for a thorough examination of the phenomenon while acknowledging the complex and interwoven nature of leadership issues in a remote work setting.

Thirdly, the research study comprises six semi-structured interviews. Five with team members, and one with the team leader. While the sample size does have limitations regarding the generalizability of findings, it yields valuable insights into the experiences and viewpoints of individuals dealing with remote collaboration in an insurance organization. Moreover, it's important to note that the cultural background of team members and the team leader, as well as their diverse backgrounds, could have influenced their experiences, further adding complexity and richness to the data.

Additionally, in the interest of transparency, it's important to note that the researcher has been an employee of the company in question for a few years. However, the researcher is taking measures to prevent any bias and provide an objective analysis.

7. Data analysis

In the previous chapters, the researcher set out on a trip to learn about the many different aspects of leadership and teamwork in remote settings. This journey was guided by the question of how leaders and team members navigate the complex terrain of working with people who are in different places. Now, in this most important chapter, we get into the empirical results and thorough data analysis that are at the heart of this master's thesis.

This chapter encompasses both the challenges themselves and strategies for overcoming them. To achieve this, the challenges and their corresponding solutions are approached from two distinct angles: the team members' perspective and the leader's perspective. This dual perspective analysis serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it grants us valuable insights into the leader's objectives, strategies, and management techniques within this unique team dynamic, and assesses their efficacy from the viewpoint of team members. Secondly, it offers the opportunity to scrutinize the alignment between the viewpoints of team members and the team leader concerning the challenges they confront in this distinctive remote working context. By taking into account both perspectives, this chapter aims to illuminate the complexities of working

from home within a dispersed, cross-cultural team while pinpointing potential areas for enhancement in leadership and team dynamics.

Chapters 7.1 and 7.2 address the first part of the research question, examining the challenges of cross-cultural dispersed teams from the perspectives of team members and team leaders, respectively. Chapters 7.3 and 7.4 delve into the second part of the research question, focusing on strategies to overcome these challenges, initially from the perspective of team members and subsequently from the viewpoint of team leaders. The final chapter contextualizes all these findings within the cultural dimension.

7.1 Challenges of working from home in a dispersed, cross-cultural team

(Team members' perspective)

The challenges of working from home within a dispersed, cross-cultural team have become increasingly prominent in today's evolving work landscape. This study delves into these challenges from two distinct but interconnected perspectives: that of the team members and that of the team lead.

7.1.1 Lack of personal connection transformed into trust and communication issues

Trust issues can arise when there's a lack of regular contact. Extended periods of remote work can potentially erode trust within the team, as some team members highlighted. Without the typical face-to-face interactions or opportunities for informal online bonding activities, maintaining positive working relationships becomes more challenging. The virtual nature of communication makes it difficult to establish and nurture deeper relationships within the team. A sense of personal connection was also found to be lacking. Boris emphasized the importance of personal familiarity, stating, "If you know the colleague personally, then it's easier to understand when he's making a joke or he means it like in a polite way, not in a rude way."

Feelings of loneliness during remote work were expressed by some team members. The initial phase of collaboration involved adapting to each other's unique communication styles, as

Boris pointed out, emphasizing the absence of informal conversations and reduced opportunities for casual interactions with colleagues as factors contributing to this sense of isolation. Radoslav echoed this sentiment, highlighting the longing for more personal interactions: "I used to get coffees in the office, and now it gets a little bit lonely sitting at my desk at home the whole day without the option for an informal office talk." Team members stressed the need to consciously create opportunities to connect with colleagues, recognizing the absence of natural office interactions in a remote setup. Maria: "This is where the consciousness about creating opportunities (to connect) comes in."

The importance of being mindful about the means of delivering messages was evident among team members. In a remote work environment, the choice of communication tools and platforms can significantly affect message clarity and effectiveness. Team members noted that misinterpretations or misunderstandings could arise if the means of delivery were not carefully considered. Maria emphasized this point, stating, "But we have noticed once starting to work as a dispersed team that also you need the proper means of delivery."

Maria: "There are also colleagues who are scared to ask questions and sometimes with the remote setting do not feel secure. As pointed out by Maria, in the remote setting, team members sometimes felt hesitant to ask questions. Unlike traditional office settings where spontaneous interactions are common, some team members felt uncomfortable reaching out with queries in a remote context. This hesitation could hinder the flow of information and potentially result in unaddressed concerns.

Furthermore, onboarding new team members in a remote environment presented unique challenges. Boris: "I think it is very important to mention my onboarding, as this was such a new experience not only for me but for the leader and the rest of the team as well." Veronika: "And I'm not sure how junior colleagues would act in such a situation because it was quite challenging, I admit, to join the company when you are just receiving some instructions online, etc., and never meeting the team in person, so we don't have the clarity, it's not easy." Team members discussed the difficulties of integrating new colleagues into the team without the benefit of in-person introductions and interactions. Boris shared his experience, noting that he hadn't met his team leader in person until the end of the COVID pandemic, making it challenging to establish one-on-one trust.

However, it's crucial to acknowledge that certain communication challenges surfaced during the interviews. Radoslav shared a disheartening incident involving a colleague who responded to his questions with counter-questions, leaving him with a sense that his inquiries were unwarranted or his understanding was lacking. He explained, "...in some cases my

questions were answered by counter questions in a manner that made me feel like it was wrong that I had a question, or that my questions were on a level so basic, I should know the answer for 100%. Or maybe my ideas or proposals for changes, when presented, were attacked in a similar way and I felt guilty for wrongdoing." Furthermore, he described instances in which his proposals and ideas for change were met with a similar approach, ultimately causing him to feel culpable. This discordance with the previously outlined communication ethos suggests the existence of unresolved issues that specifically affected these two team members.

7.1.2 Cultural Misunderstanding

Working from home in dispersed, cross-cultural teams introduces unique challenges related to cultural differences. In this chapter, we explore the challenges identified by team members during interviews, shedding light on the complexities of maintaining a cohesive team when team members hail from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Team member from Slovakia observed that their Czech colleagues appeared to be more unhappy and tended to express complaints more frequently compared to their counterparts from other cultural backgrounds. Boris: "I think people from Slovakia in our team they were more OK with everything. More chill and easygoing I would say. I mean with the tasks and with the results and so on. So at least from my personal view, the Czech colleagues are like more uhm...Not only arguing but disappointed all the time with the situation. They are easily let down and seem more unhappy with all the situation." This variance in attitudes and communication styles could potentially create tension within the team, as varying perceptions of satisfaction may affect collaboration and team morale. It can be speculated that the difference in how the team members react to new information or changes can be explained by a power distance score of Czechia and Slovakia. Whereas both countries are on the upper end of the spectrum Slovakia scored 100 points. In Slovak culture, there is a higher acceptance of inherent hierarchical differences, and centralization tends to be favored. Subordinates typically anticipate clear guidance from their superiors, indicating a preference for a benevolent autocratic leadership approach, therefore can be perceived as less unhappy with the decision "from above" since it is in their nature to expect hierarchical decisions being made.

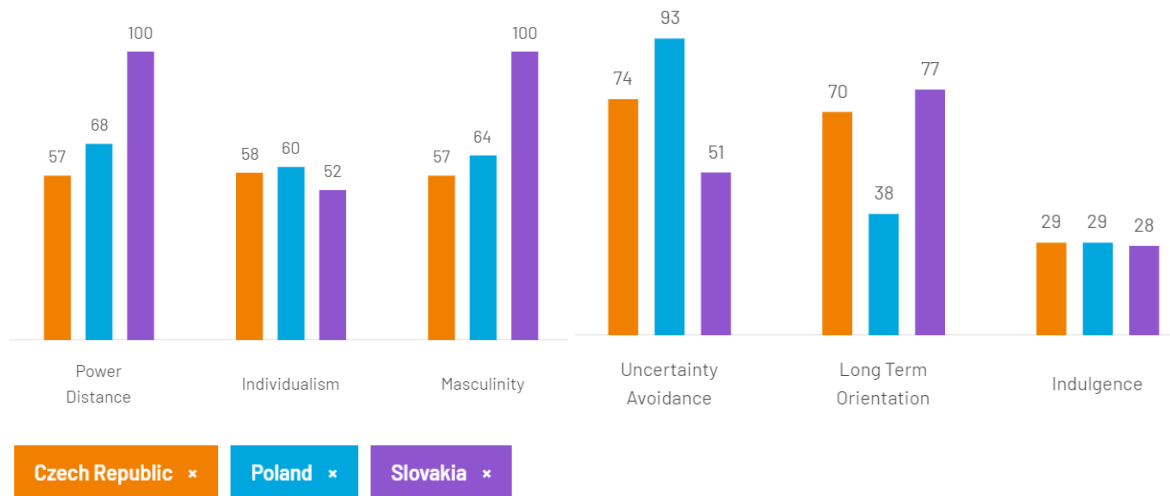


Fig. 2: Cultural Comparison of Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland (Hofstede, 2022)

On the other hand, team members from Czechia noted that Slovaks within the team tended to be more reserved when giving direct and strong feedback. The cultural inclination towards indirect communication could hinder the effectiveness of feedback exchanges, making it challenging to address issues promptly and constructively. Radoslav: “People in Slovakia tend to be a bit reserved when it comes to giving direct and strong feedback. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it can slow down the process of improvement.” We can speculate that the level of hierarchy and power distance within a culture can impact the willingness to give feedback. In cultures with a flatter hierarchy and lower power distance, individuals may feel more comfortable providing feedback to superiors or colleagues. In contrast, cultures with a strong hierarchical structure may discourage subordinates from offering feedback to those in higher positions. The difference in the willingness to give feedback between Czech and Slovak cultures can be attributed to several cultural dimensions. Firstly, Slovakia exhibits a higher score on the Power Distance dimension, indicating a greater acceptance of hierarchical structures. In such cultures, there may be a reluctance among subordinates to provide feedback to superiors due to the perceived power distance. Conversely, Czechia, characterized by a more individualistic society, places a higher emphasis on individual autonomy and merit-based interactions. This cultural inclination towards individualism fosters an environment where feedback is more readily exchanged, as an offense is linked to personal guilt and self-esteem rather than hierarchy. Therefore, the cultural differences in power distance and individualism contribute to varying attitudes towards feedback sharing in these two Central European nations.

Navigating cultural differences within a dispersed team working from home presents both opportunities and challenges. Team members from diverse cultural backgrounds bring a wealth of perspectives and approaches to problem-solving. However, understanding and respecting these differences require effort and cultural sensitivity. Recognizing and addressing cultural challenges within cross-cultural teams is vital for maintaining a harmonious and productive work environment.

7.1.3 Technological challenges

In the ever-evolving landscape of remote work, dispersed, cross-cultural teams face a multitude of challenges that impact their collaborative efforts and productivity.

One of the foremost challenges faced by team members when discussing technical challenges is the technical issues during calls and difficulties with internet connectivity. Team members highlighted instances where poor connectivity disrupted virtual meetings, impeded communication, and hindered the overall workflow. Team members quickly realize that technology hiccups can impact productivity, necessitating the need for a reliable tech setup. Maria: "Because I mean you can laugh about but it at the beginning of each meeting: Do you hear me? Do you hear me? Can you see me? Yes, we can hear you but cannot see you...and so on. It's funny at the beginning but eventually, you have to be careful that the technology works and it's not cutting from your productivity time. And that's not preventing you from trying to reach out to someone because you expect it to fail and be annoyed by the problems, so you don't even try out to call someone." Despite technological advancements, internet connectivity issues remain a limitation. Team members acknowledge that these issues can disrupt the flow of work and communication, highlighting the need for robust internet connections in a dispersed work environment. Challenges related to navigating software, troubleshooting technical issues, or embracing new digital platforms can create disparities in the team's digital fluency. Boris: "But there were some cases with other maybe a little bit older colleagues when learning a new functionality of the channel was a little bit more challenging." Lucia: "It was a bit tricky, especially for some of the older colleagues who weren't used to these tools." This divide, based on generational differences, can impact the team's ability to work cohesively in a remote setting. These challenges illuminate the multifaceted nature of remote work in dispersed, cross-cultural teams. Notably, some team members, particularly those from older

generations, faced challenges in adapting to these digital tools. This highlights the importance of providing additional support and training for individuals less familiar with technology.

Another significant challenge that emerged from the interviews was in the brainstorming or ideation process while working in a remote setting. Veronika: “When it comes to the ideation process, being in the same room and having a physical whiteboard or dashboard to draw on makes things easier. Locking yourself in a room for this ideation process can really help speed up the process. Even though we were trying to simulate this process online, sitting in front of a computer and using digital tools that are similar to whiteboards is just not the same experience.” In a traditional office, the collaborative environment facilitates spontaneous discussions and idea generation. However, remote work often necessitates isolated thinking, hindering the creative brainstorming process. The absence of face-to-face interactions, informal chats, and impromptu whiteboard sessions poses a unique challenge to generating innovative ideas. Team members may find it challenging to replicate the creative synergy that a physical office environment offers. Brainstorming hurdles, internet connectivity issues, and technology proficiency gaps underscore the importance of addressing these obstacles to ensure effective collaboration and productivity in the evolving landscape of remote work.

7.2 Challenges of leading a cross-cultured dispersed team working from home

(Team leader’s perspective)

The researcher sought to ascertain whether Agata's perspectives aligned with those of the team members, or if any discrepancies emerged after a comprehensive analysis. Agata's insights offer a valuable lens to delve into the complex challenges faced by team leaders. As the leader of a geographically dispersed team with diverse cultural backgrounds, Agata's firsthand experiences provide a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand. As previously mentioned, the purpose of conducting interviews with both the leader and the team members was to assess the alignment of their responses and to determine whether the leader held any mistaken assumptions about her team's preferences. Additionally, this approach aimed to uncover any discrepancies between the perspectives of the leader and those of the team

A prominent challenge highlighted by Agata is the necessity for effective communication within her team. Agata: “...the most significant challenge is fostering effective

communication within the team.” She acknowledges that the team's cultural and geographical diversity can lead to communication breakdowns, stemming from language barriers, differing communication styles, and varied cultural norms.

Another critical challenge identified by Agata pertains to trust-building and collaboration, particularly among team members with slightly distinct cultural backgrounds. Agata: “Another big challenge with dispersed themes, and especially teams coming from slightly different cultural backgrounds, is least for me creating trust in the working environment” Nurturing trust within a dispersed work setting with limited face-to-face interactions poses a significant challenge. Spontaneous collaborative moments, like casual discussions or brainstorming sessions, often prove elusive. Agata recognizes the importance of creating trust and promoting informal collaboration, actively incorporating these principles into her team's work culture.

Agata also notes the challenge of varying productivity levels among team members from different cultural backgrounds. Some thrive in a fast-paced work environment, while others prefer a more relaxed approach. These disparities can lead to differences in task prioritization and completion, potentially affecting overall team efficiency. To address this challenge, Agata and her team are dedicated to aligning work processes and expectations, aiming to foster an environment where each team member's unique contributions are valued.

Both the leader and her team underscored the importance of open communication and trust within the team. This shared emphasis reflects a harmonious consensus on the essential aspects of working in a cross-cultural dispersed team. Viewed through Agata's lens, it's clear that her team actively turns challenges into growth opportunities. Their unwavering commitment to effective communication, trust-building, and diverse work styles enables them to thrive as a cross-cultural dispersed team, effectively addressing these challenges.

7.3 How to overcome challenges of a cross-cultural dispersed team (Team members’ perspective)

In today's dynamic work landscape, remote work and cross-border teams have become increasingly prevalent. This chapter delves into the unique challenges faced by leaders in such scenarios and provides practical solutions. Our research focuses on addressing two key questions: What are the challenges inherent to dispersed teams, and how can leaders effectively overcome these challenges? In this chapter, we are attempting to answer the second part of the

research question explore best practices, and offer recommendations grounded in both interview analysis and insights from the literature review. By distilling the findings, we aim to equip leaders with actionable methods to navigate the complexities of remote work successfully and excel in a globalized work environment.

7.3.1 Foster Trust and Open Communication

The research findings as shared by Veronika, Lucia, Radoslav, Boris, and Maria, emphasize trust as a foundational pillar within the team. Trust and open communication can be used as tools for overcoming challenges within a team that are more pronounced in a cross-cultural dispersed team. Team members consistently stress its paramount importance. Open and transparent communication plays a key role in building and maintaining this trust. Radoslav explains: “When it comes to trust in our team, I'd say it's pretty solid. I mean, we've got this open communication thing going on that, in my book, is like the secret sauce to making us work so well.” Trust is seen as crucial for successful teamwork, and the team collectively understands its pivotal role in promoting collaboration and synergy. Veronika adds, “...I considered that a really good foundation for trust.” Trust is not static but shaped by individual experiences and interactions.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that trust, while highly valued, is not always unwavering. Trust, highly valued, can fluctuate, as Maria's account highlights: “We also had a colleague who thought working from home means basically being on vacation... He was not picking up the tasks...” These fluctuations underscore the human aspect of trust. Personal connections are vital in trust dynamics. Leaders who invest in fostering these connections through online coffee chats, for example, earn trust and respect, as Boris notes: “...the leader was trying to stay in touch with me more... which I appreciated a lot.” These interactions bridge trust gaps and deepen connections, emphasizing collaborative trust-building efforts. As mentioned earlier, informal online touchpoints with the camera turned on play a key role in fostering stronger connections among dispersed cross-cultural team members, as Maria pointed out: “To be able to see your colleagues drink coffee and so on.”

On the flip side, it's essential to recognize that different team members had varied relationships and experiences when initially joining the team, leading to differences in the levels of trust and the speed at which trust developed. This diversity in trust dynamics was evident throughout the interviews.

For instance, Boris, who became a part of the team during the challenging times of the Covid pandemic, faced unique challenges. He didn't have prior connections with anyone on the team, unlike some of his colleagues who were already acquainted with the leader and other team members. Boris: "... I never built such a really deep relationship with the other team members. Maybe it was because we just didn't click, but not being able to meet in person and get to know each other was a significant challenge for me."

Conversely, Radoslav's experience with the shift to telework was not as negative as Boris's. He mentioned, "Now, I'm way more comfortable shooting off quick questions or updates to my colleagues, whether they're in the same room or just a desk away." Maria, who had been a part of the team before the transition to telework, echoed a similar sentiment: "With those with whom I interact more often, it's really just changed from seeing the person in person to video chatting."

In interviews with team members, a consistent theme emerged regarding the importance of open communication, as emphasized by Maria: "...encouraged to come up with any kind of work-related issues you are facing and you can openly speak." She further added, "I think we have very open communication with no repercussions, and you are allowed or able to speak freely." Boris echoed a similar sentiment, highlighting his ability to freely express both dissatisfaction and satisfaction with various aspects of the team's operations: "I can freely express my thoughts on the things that I was not happy with, also the things that I was happy with." Veronika shared her perspective by stating, "I feel comfortable asking questions and raising concerns unless there is a significant reason to hold back." These statements reflect a culture of unrestricted dialogue and a safe space for team members to voice their concerns and ideas, fostering transparency and constructive feedback. The unanimity among team members regarding their perceived ability to freely express themselves and their conviction that their questions or remarks would be received without ridicule or judgment, especially concerning novel ideas or uncertainties in various domains, underscores the team's commitment to open communication. The observation that interviewees, including Slovaks, emphasized the need for strong leadership and open communication in dispersed teams, despite potential cultural tendencies toward restricted feedback, highlights the adaptability of individuals in response to specific work context demands. It also underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting individual differences within diverse teams. This paradox reminds us not to make sweeping cultural generalizations and to approach each team member as a unique individual.

Nevertheless, as evident from the interview responses, this openness is not without certain discernible boundaries, which are well-understood by all team members. Maria's

account exemplifies this understanding: "The manager then really confirmed the good basis of trust when she took up the hint, but also did not disclose to a slacker colleague where did this come from." This anecdote illustrates the team leader's discretion in handling sensitive information while upholding trust within the team. Furthermore, discussing controversial topics within the team reflects a similar sense of boundary awareness. Maria explained, "It's not about not being able to speak up, but it's rather that you don't know where your statement, in which form, could end up in the end. Even with good intentions, on controversial topics, we are all more cautious, which makes sense, I think." This cautious approach to discussing contentious subjects within the team underscores the team's understanding of the need for prudence in communication. Team members trust their leader's judgment and acknowledge the necessity of discretion. Boris noted, "I can think of instances when she was not transparent, possibly to prevent unnecessary panic, but I can understand that." Lucia echoed this sentiment, acknowledging, "Sure, there are certain things that Agata can't spill the beans on, like the super-secret, hush-hush stuff that's way above our pay grade."

Team members uniformly advocated for a proactive and transparent communication style, which they found instrumental in facilitating effective collaboration. This involved providing thorough information to support their statements and actively engaging in reciprocal questioning within the team. As Radoslav pointed out, this approach involved "proactively explaining myself as clearly as possible, providing all the necessary information to support my point." He also highlighted the absence of reluctance when it came to seeking clarification through questions, underlining the team's mutual expectation of such reciprocal inquiries.

7.3.2 Acknowledge Different Languages and Cultures

The linguistic landscape within our team is a fascinating blend of history, culture, and communication dynamics that offers valuable insights into the cultural dimensions of Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, as framed by Hofstede's renowned framework. This unique dynamic unfolds through several key aspects, each shedding light on the intricate interplay of culture and language.

One remarkable facet of our linguistic landscape is the mutual intelligibility of Czech and Slovak languages, a phenomenon deeply rooted in their shared historical context. The historical ties between these nations have left an indelible mark on their linguistic understanding. Team members have noted that Slovaks tend to comprehend Czech more easily

than the reverse. This mutual intelligibility serves as a testament to the profound influence of history on language comprehension, and it resonates strongly with Hofstede's cultural dimension of long-term orientation. In these cultures, traditions and historical ties hold immense significance, shaping not only language but also the broader cultural landscape.

However, despite this linguistic similarity, instances have arisen where team members found it necessary to engage in multiple conversations for genuine understanding. This underscores the critical importance of clarity in communication, particularly when navigating complex or nuanced topics. The emphasis on precise and unambiguous communication aligns with the cultural dimension of low uncertainty avoidance, as highlighted in Hofstede's framework. This dimension reflects a greater willingness to tolerate ambiguity and engage in open communication, even in the face of intricate subjects.

Leaders in this linguistic and cultural context bear the crucial responsibility of ensuring that communication is not only effective but also accessible to all team members, regardless of their linguistic backgrounds. A significant revelation is the positive impact of communicating in native languages, which fosters comfort and transparency within the team. Team members have expressed that using their native languages allows them to fully and clearly express themselves, nurturing a deeper sense of camaraderie. This observation resonates with Hofstede's cultural dimensions, where individualism and indulgence are lower, emphasizing conformity and restraint, even in linguistic interactions.

Further insights emerge from the distinctions in company culture between Czechia and Slovakia. Czechia's perceived open work culture, characterized by transparency and open communication, reflects the interplay of cultural dimensions such as power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. These dimensions significantly influence team dynamics and interactions with leadership, ultimately shaping the professional environment. Despite the cultural and linguistic differences observed, team members have generally felt that these disparities have had a limited impact on their professional interactions and work-related activities. This cohesion and shared commitment to work and common objectives have facilitated effective collaboration, mitigating any significant challenges stemming from cultural diversity.

7.3.3 Utilize Technology for the best

Instant messaging and video chats emerge as the linchpin of effective communication within the team. These tools bridge the physical divide and enable real-time interactions, making them invaluable for team collaboration. Merely providing technology is not sufficient; team members must also possess the necessary technological literacy. Understanding the nuances of using digital tools and being aware of potential technical issues are crucial for effective virtual collaboration. Leaders play a pivotal role in promoting technological proficiency. The leader's initiative to set up a knowledge exchange and best practice sharing platform within the team fosters a culture of learning and support. The "buddy up" approach ensures that team members feel supported and can seek help when needed. Boris: "For this purpose, our leader set up a knowledge exchange and best practice sharing within our team and even if someone needed help we would "buddy up" so then everyone that needed it felt supported." Innovative tools that facilitate video calls and screen sharing contribute significantly to effective collaboration. Team members can visually pinpoint locations on the screen, enhancing clarity when explaining concepts or discussing work-related matters. Veronika: "we found tools that allowed us to have video calls and draw on each other's screens, so if someone was explaining something to me or vice versa, we were able to pinpoint the location on the screen and collaborate effectively." The team employs a blend of communication channels based on the nature and urgency of the communication. Instant messaging via Teams is the go-to for quick chats, while email serves for more formal or less time-sensitive communication. The researcher wanted to explore how team members feel about working in dispersed teams and how this relates to their leader's leadership style. By analyzing what team members like and dislike about their current situation and considering the leader's strategies and goals, the researcher can provide practical advice for other leaders in similar situations. This research offers valuable insights into dispersed team dynamics and offers actionable recommendations for leaders aiming to improve their team's performance and collaboration.

7.4 Navigating Challenges

(Team Leader's perspective)

In this chapter, let us delve into Agata's leadership perspective within her geographically dispersed policy administration team. Through insights from her interview and team members' feedback, the researcher gain a comprehensive understanding of her strategies and qualities that have contributed to her team's success in overcoming obstacles.

Agata emphasized, "Building trust for me is all about showing up for my team, both during the good times and the challenging moments." She highlighted her commitment to consistency, honesty, and learning from mistakes as key elements in maintaining trust over time. This transparent communication sets the stage for an environment where team members feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. Agata added, "Honesty is a core value, and I always stand by my word, never resorting to dishonesty." Her unwavering honesty fosters a culture of integrity within the team, where transparency is the norm. Agata's leadership style leans towards collaboration and inclusivity. She actively seeks input from team members, especially those with expertise in specific areas. Agata explained, "I try to get everyone on the team to talk to each other openly and honestly, making it a safe place for ideas to be shared and talked about." This approach not only acknowledges diverse skills but also empowers team members to contribute their knowledge to problem-solving and decision-making processes. Agata proactively addresses challenges by seeking out tools and solutions that benefit the team, reinforcing her commitment to their efficiency.

Moreover, team members who have experienced Agata's leadership firsthand echoed these sentiments. The team appreciates Agata's commitment to clear and objective communication, which creates a shared understanding and trust within the team.

Inclusivity is central to the approach. The Leader ensures that everyone's voice is heard, fostering mutual respect and trust within the team. Agata described her approach as ensuring "everyone's ideas and contributions are recognized at work." Her leadership encourages open discussions and sets clear roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Team members appreciate her approachability, which creates an environment where they feel comfortable seeking guidance. Team members who have experienced Agata's leadership firsthand appreciate her commitment to inclusivity. One team member expressed, "It's pretty awesome how she's right there in the middle of it all, making sure everyone's voice is heard." This commitment to inclusivity fosters a sense of trust within the team.

Agata's leadership is marked by its non-hierarchical nature. Agata's collaborative style promotes a growth mindset among team members, empowering them to make decisions and take ownership of their tasks. She stated, "I give them jobs and set clear expectations, so they can work on their own and be responsible." In an era of remote work, Agata's adept use of technology facilitates clear and consistent communication. She leads by example by using communication tools herself, encouraging their adoption among team members. Agata explained, "I use the tools I want my people to use for all kinds of communication." This approach streamlines virtual collaboration, ensuring that everyone remains connected and informed. Her commitment to learning the primary language of her team members demonstrates her dedication to effective communication. She stated, "Speaking the local language is a very helpful and valuable in a role such as mine. In order to understand my team on another level." By bridging linguistic divides, she ensures that all team members feel included and understood. Her approach promotes knowledge sharing and understanding among a culturally diverse team. Agata places great importance on setting clear goals and expectations. She allows her team members to actively participate in this process, fostering ownership and accountability. Agata emphasized, "I prefer goal setting to be a bottom up approach instead of me giving targets to my reports as I see fit." Regular one-on-one meetings, team meetings, and written documentation further ensure clarity regarding roles and responsibilities. Agata leverages her team's diverse skill sets by allocating tasks based on individual strengths. She stated, "By allocating tasks based on the skill set of each of my team members and when the situation allows, teaming them up," she encourages collaboration and encourages team members to share their expertise. It also aligns with her commitment to open discussions, valuing diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Agata's leadership centers on open communication, collaboration, and trust, enabling her team to thrive in remote work and diverse settings. Agata's cultural proximity with her team from Slovakia and Czechia promotes seamless communication and a harmonious work environment. This alignment underscores culture's influence on communication, leadership, and team dynamics. Conversely, significant cultural disparities between leaders and teams can introduce challenges, including communication misunderstandings and conflicts.

7.5 Cultural comparison of interviewees

In this chapter, we focus on the cultural comparisons among our interviewees, recognizing how their diverse cultural backgrounds shape their views and responses. Understanding these cultural influences is crucial, as they play a significant role in how team members perceive remote work challenges, leadership dynamics, and teamwork. By examining these cultural variations, we gain deeper insights into the intricate dynamics of our dispersed, cross-cultural team, highlighting the complexities involved in addressing challenges within such a diverse group.

In the upcoming table, we compare three cultures using six of Hofstede's dimensions. Each dimension is denoted by "H" (High), "L" (Low), or "M" (Medium) to signify its ranking among the three cultures, offering an overview of these dimensions within our context of study.

Name	Culture	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long Term Orientation	Indulgence
Maria	Slovak	H	L	H	H	H	M
Boris	Slovak						
Radoslav	Czech	M	M	L	M	M	H
Lucia	Czech						
Veronika	Czech						
Agata	Polish	L	H	M	L	L	H

Table.3: Comparison of Hofstede's dimension of the interviewees (Own design; based on Hofstede, 2023)

As also shown in chapter 7.1.2 in a Fig. 2, all 3 countries Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland exhibit relatively high scores in Power Distance, indicating a general acceptance of hierarchical structures within organizations. In these cultures, there is an acknowledgment of inherent inequalities, and centralization tends to be popular. Subordinates often expect clear directives from their superiors, reflecting a preference for a benevolent autocratic leadership style. Slovakia, despite sharing a high power distance score with CZ and PL, presents an interesting nuance. While hierarchy is acknowledged, a manager in Slovakia still needs to earn respect and acceptance through visible results. This suggests that in SK, the hierarchical structure may be more tempered by a desire for demonstrable competence and effectiveness.

In CZ, a highly Individualist society, offense often leads to guilt and a dip in self-esteem. The employer-employee relationship is seen as a mutually advantageous contract, emphasizing merit-based hiring and promotion. Management in CZ focuses on individuals and their unique contributions. Poland's culture presents an intriguing blend of high Individualism and a need for hierarchy. This creates a unique tension that can be both delicate and fruitful in workplace relationships.

In cultures like Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, which exhibit masculinity, there is a strong belief in "living to work." Managers are expected to demonstrate decisiveness and assertiveness. These cultures place a significant emphasis on concepts like equity, competition, and performance. Additionally, conflicts tend to be resolved through direct confrontation and addressing issues head-on.

In Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia, which exhibit high Uncertainty Avoidance, there's a strong adherence to strict social norms and rules. These cultures value punctuality, hard work, and a sense of security. Innovation may face resistance in favor of traditional practices. This dimension significantly impacts their societal behaviors and values.

In the context of long-term orientation, Czechia and Slovakia exhibit a high score, indicating a pragmatic approach. This means they believe truth is context-dependent, adapt traditions to changing conditions, emphasize saving and investing, and value perseverance. Poland, on the other hand, scores low in this dimension, reflecting a more normative mindset. People in such societies prioritize establishing absolute truth, respect traditions, have a lower propensity to save, and focus on quick results.

In the context of indulgence, the cultures of Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia exhibit restraint. These societies have a low score in this dimension, which is characterized by tendencies toward cynicism and pessimism. Unlike indulgent societies, those with restraint do not prioritize leisure time and are more focused on controlling their desires. People in these cultures often feel that their actions are restricted by social norms and may perceive indulgence as somewhat wrong.

In conclusion, our exploration of Hofstede's cultural dimensions for Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia has revealed a striking alignment across these nations. While each country possesses its unique cultural characteristics and nuances, it is noteworthy that the dimensions consistently lean towards similar ends in these three Central European countries.

8. Research Findings

In this chapter, we present key findings from interviews and observations, focusing on trust, onboarding, communication, and leadership dynamics within dispersed teams. Our research question centers on the challenges faced by leaders in cross-cultural teams amidst the growing trend of telework. By interviewing both Agata and her team members, we sought to not only understand their individual perspectives but also to uncover any disparities in their perceptions. Through interviews with Agata and her team, we discovered a significant alignment in their perspectives and proposed solutions. This alignment underscores Agata's effective leadership, characterized by transparent communication and shared commitment to overcoming challenges. This chapter delves into these challenges and showcases the collective efforts of Agata and her team to enhance their remote work experience. This chapter aims to shed light on the challenges faced by Agata and her team, and their collective effort in finding solutions to enhance their working experience. It is crucial to reiterate that these findings are applicable to the specific context of dispersed, cross-cultural teams.

One of the central findings of this research is the pivotal role of the onboarding process in shaping team members' levels of trust in dispersed, cross-cultural settings of this type. It was discerned that trust is malleable and can evolve over time based on the challenges faced during the onboarding phase and how these challenges are addressed. Team members who experienced a well-structured onboarding process tended to establish trust more swiftly, while those facing difficulties in their initial integration required additional time to develop trust in their team and leadership. Another notable finding is the diversity in trust dynamics among team members. Their unique experiences upon joining the team resulted in varying levels of trust and the speed at which it developed. This diversity was evident in interviews, emphasizing the importance of leaders recognizing and accommodating these variations in trust development.

While open communication is highly valued, it's not always absolute. Privacy and confidentiality emerged as essential boundaries in team communication. Instances of team members exploiting remote work freedom and neglecting responsibilities were observed. These fluctuations highlight the human aspect of trust within the team and underscore the need for clear expectations and accountability. A significant finding highlights the team leader's impact on team dynamics. Team members with prior knowledge of the leader showed higher loyalty and reported greater team satisfaction. The leader plays a crucial role in building trust, open communication, and relationships, especially during onboarding. Effective communication and

interaction with the leader, particularly during onboarding, were considered essential. Occasional team meetings were preferred and seen to improve team relationships. These meetings enhanced understanding and collaboration among team members, emphasizing the significance of maintaining interpersonal connections even in dispersed teams.

The research emphasized the importance of fostering trust and strong relationships from a new team member's start, with long-term benefits for team cohesion and performance. Leaders also play a crucial role in promoting positive relationships and boosting motivation and engagement. Leadership style significantly impacted team dynamics.

It's vital to note that Agata shares a cultural affinity with her team from Slovakia and Czechia, likely contributing to their harmonious working relationship and effective communication. However, these insights may not directly apply when a leader comes from a vastly different culture. Culture significantly shapes communication styles, leadership approaches, and team dynamics. Agata's cultural alignment likely enhances her understanding of team needs and working styles, contributing to remote collaboration success. Conversely, leaders from distinct cultures may face additional challenges due to differences in communication norms, expectations, and work practices. Therefore, while these findings offer valuable insights into cross-cultural leadership and teamwork, adapting them for entirely different cultural contexts is essential. Each cultural context presents unique nuances requiring navigation for effective collaboration

8.1 Recommendations for leaders of dispersed teams

Leading a dispersed team comes with its unique set of challenges and opportunities. Effectively navigating these challenges while capitalizing on the advantages requires a strategic and adaptable leadership approach. In this chapter, the researcher provides a set of recommendations for leaders of dispersed teams, drawing from the insights gathered in this study. These recommendations encompass best practices when leading a dispersed team.

Drawing upon the analysis of the gathered data, whether from the team members, or from the literature review, leaders of dispersed teams should consistently prioritize honesty, transparency, and reliability in their interactions with the team. It is imperative to follow through on commitments, whether they are related to tasks, deadlines, or promises. Reliability bolsters trust and confidence in the leader's capabilities. Additionally, leaders must actively

encourage open and honest communication among team members. They should lead by example, demonstrating their willingness to listen, provide feedback, and address concerns.

What to Do	What Not to Do
Build Trust	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foster personal connections among team ● Advocate open and honest communication ● Organize team-building and virtual events ● Create chances for non-work conv. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assume trust will spontaneously grow ● Isolate team members ● Disregard team members' need for personal connections
Open Communication	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish clear communication channels ● Conduct regular check-ins ● Create safe space for speaking up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Disregard team members' input or ideas ● Neglect regular communication ● Keep important information to yourself
Utilize properly technical tools	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure team members are proficient in technology tools ● Provide training and support ● “Buddy up” approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overload team members with excessive digital tools ● Assume everyone is tech-savvy ● Avoid offering guidance on tool selection
Cultural differences	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Promote talk on cultural distinctions ● Try to understand cultural background ● Leverage the team's diverse backgrounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Make assumptions about cultural norms ● Disregard or dismiss cultural differences ● Engage in cultural bias or discrimination
Onboarding	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish a structured onboarding process ● Be present and supportive towards ● Offer support and in the initial phase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Neglect the onboarding experience ● Neglect new members' challenges ● Fail to recognize the impact of onboarding on trust

Table 4: Recommendation for leaders of cross-cultured dispersed teams (Own design)

Creating a safe space for sharing ideas, questions, and concerns fosters a culture of transparency and mutual respect. Understanding the appreciation of the team of this trait, and using the knowledge of the literature review earlier in this research the research acknowledges that communication, trust openness, etc. are interconnected and are helping to build mutual understanding, therefore strengthening the working morale of the team. This is enforced with the findings from the interviews and the viewpoints of the team members, it is important to say that trust is indeed the cornerstone of effective leadership in dispersed teams. A collaborative leadership style is particularly effective in dispersed teams. Leaders should value diverse

perspectives and actively encourage team members to participate in discussions and decision-making processes. Collaboration not only leverages the collective wisdom of the team but also promotes a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. Leaders should empower team members by granting them the autonomy to take ownership of their work and make decisions. This empowerment can be facilitated through training and skill development opportunities that enhance team members' capabilities and confidence.

Leaders should empower team members by granting them the autonomy to take ownership of their work and make decisions. This empowerment can be facilitated through training and skill development opportunities that enhance team members' capabilities and confidence. Given the virtual nature of dispersed teams, leaders should provide training and support for the effective use of communication and collaboration tools. Utilizing technology optimally enables efficient virtual communication and ensures that team members are proficient in leveraging these tools for collaboration. Leaders should employ regular one-on-one meetings, team meetings, and written documentation to provide clarity on goals and tasks. Clarity minimizes misunderstandings and aligns the team toward common objectives.

9. Discussion

This chapter delves into the crucial leadership role in dispersed teams, addressing communication barriers, cultural distinctions, and coordination challenges (Cascio and Shurygailo, 2003; Gibson and Cohen, 2003). We explore leadership styles, communication approaches, and technology use to foster effective collaboration. Empirical evidence and theory offer insights into strategies to boost team performance, cohesion, and satisfaction in dispersed settings. This chapter aids in managing globalized teams, revealing valuable insights into their dynamics and impact.

Several aspects of this research align with findings from previous studies on geographically dispersed teams. Notably, the challenges faced by dispersed teams, as highlighted in earlier research (Cascio and Shurygailo, 2003), resonate with the findings of this study. Common challenges such as communication barriers, coordination difficulties, and reduced team cohesion have been well-documented in the literature (Järvenpää and Leidner,

1999; Bell and Kozlowski, 2002). This study reaffirms the persistence of these challenges and underscores their continued relevance in the context of geographically dispersed teams.

One of the less expected findings of this study pertains to the significance of the onboarding phase for geographically dispersed teams. While existing literature had provided insights into the challenges faced by dispersed teams (Gibson and Cohen, 2003; Cascio and Shurygailo, 2003), the importance of the onboarding phase had not been emphasized to the same degree. Our research revealed that a well-structured onboarding process significantly impacts team cohesion, communication, and overall effectiveness. This result emphasizes the critical role of leaders in ensuring that new team members are seamlessly integrated into the dispersed team, with a strong focus on building relationships and establishing clear communication channels from the outset. While the significance of onboarding in traditional teams has been explored (Bauer and Erdogan, 2011), its relevance to geographically dispersed teams has not been extensively emphasized in prior literature. This study recognizes the critical role of onboarding in setting the stage for effective team collaboration and cohesion, thereby offering a unique perspective on leadership in dispersed teams.

Another significant finding from this study is the variability in trust dynamics among team members within geographically dispersed teams. Trust is a cornerstone of effective teamwork (Mutha and Srivastava, 2021) and its dynamics in dispersed teams are complex. Our research highlighted that trust does not develop uniformly across all team members. It can be speculated that factors such as the duration of collaboration with the team, previous experiences (both positive and negative), or lack of experience and the willingness to trust can be viewed as potential reasons for this variability. Trust within dispersed teams appears to be a nuanced and context-dependent process influenced by a multitude of variables. Instead, it varies based on factors such as individual personalities, communication styles, and cultural backgrounds. This underscores the importance of leaders recognizing and addressing these variations in trust levels within their teams. Leaders should implement strategies to build trust proactively, including fostering open communication, promoting transparency, and creating opportunities for team members to collaborate and build relationships.

It is also important to note that the interviewees' responses are influenced by their diverse cultural backgrounds, which can significantly impact their perceptions and answers. Culture and cultural background are integral aspects of this research, as they shape individuals' perspectives and behaviors within cross-cultural teams. Recognizing the cultural context is crucial when analyzing their responses, as it plays a pivotal role in understanding the intricacies within such teams and their dynamics. As evident from Figure 2 and Table 3, while most

dimensions align across all three countries, there are subtle differences, as previously noted. Notably, the interviewees' identified need for stronger leadership, as indicated in Table 2, appears to correspond with the values derived from Hofstede's dimensions. With higher power distance dimensions in Slovakia and Czechia, indicating more hierarchical societies, individuals are more accepting of a hierarchical order without further justification. In contexts lacking strong leadership, there may be a preference for a more authoritative leader. Intriguingly, in all other aspects, a less hierarchical approach appears to be favored. The need for a stronger, stricter leader becomes apparent primarily in conflict resolution scenarios.

Furthermore, this study extends beyond merely acknowledging challenges by drawing concrete steps for leaders of dispersed teams. While many existing studies offer insights into the issues faced by dispersed teams, they often fall short in providing actionable recommendations for addressing these challenges effectively. This research bridges this gap by proposing practical strategies and solutions that leaders can implement to enhance the functioning of their geographically dispersed teams.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, leading a cross-cultural dispersed team presents both challenges and opportunities. To navigate these effectively, leaders must adopt a strategic and adaptable approach. Drawing from the insights gathered in this study, we offer a set of recommendations for leaders of dispersed teams, encapsulated in Table 4. In conclusion, this master's thesis has delved into the critical leadership role within geographically dispersed teams, addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by communication barriers, cultural distinctions, and coordination complexities. This research contributes valuable insights to the field of managing globalized teams, shedding light on their dynamics and broader impacts.

Our findings align with prior research on geographically dispersed teams, reaffirming the persistent challenges of communication barriers, coordination difficulties, and reduced team cohesion. These challenges, which have been well-documented in the literature, remain relevant in the contemporary context of dispersed teams, emphasizing the need for ongoing attention and solutions.

One noteworthy discovery from this study is the significant role of the onboarding phase in geographically dispersed teams. While previous research had emphasized the

challenges faced by such teams, the importance of a well-structured onboarding process had not been underscored to the same extent. This study underscores the critical role of leaders in facilitating the seamless integration of new team members into dispersed teams, emphasizing relationship-building and the establishment of clear communication channels from the outset.

Trust dynamics within geographically dispersed teams also emerged as a substantial finding. Trust, a fundamental element of effective teamwork, exhibits complexity in such teams, with trust levels varying among team members. Our research underscores the need for leaders to acknowledge and address these variations, emphasizing the proactive cultivation of trust through open communication, transparency, and opportunities for relationship-building.

Cultural diversity played a pivotal role in shaping respondents' perspectives and responses, underlining the importance of recognizing the cultural context within cross-cultural teams. While there were commonalities in responses across the three countries studied, subtle differences emerged, influenced by cultural dimensions such as power distance. Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial for effective leadership and team management in cross-cultural dispersed teams.

Moreover, this research extends beyond identifying challenges by offering concrete steps and actionable recommendations for leaders of dispersed teams. In contrast to many existing studies that merely acknowledge issues, this study provides practical strategies and solutions that leaders can implement to address challenges effectively and enhance the functionality of their geographically dispersed teams.

In summary, this master's thesis has provided a comprehensive examination of leadership in geographically dispersed and crosscultural teams, offering insights into the complexities, challenges, and opportunities present in such work arrangements. The knowledge gained from this study contributes to the advancement of best practices in managing and leading geographically dispersed teams, fostering their success in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world.

11. Appendix

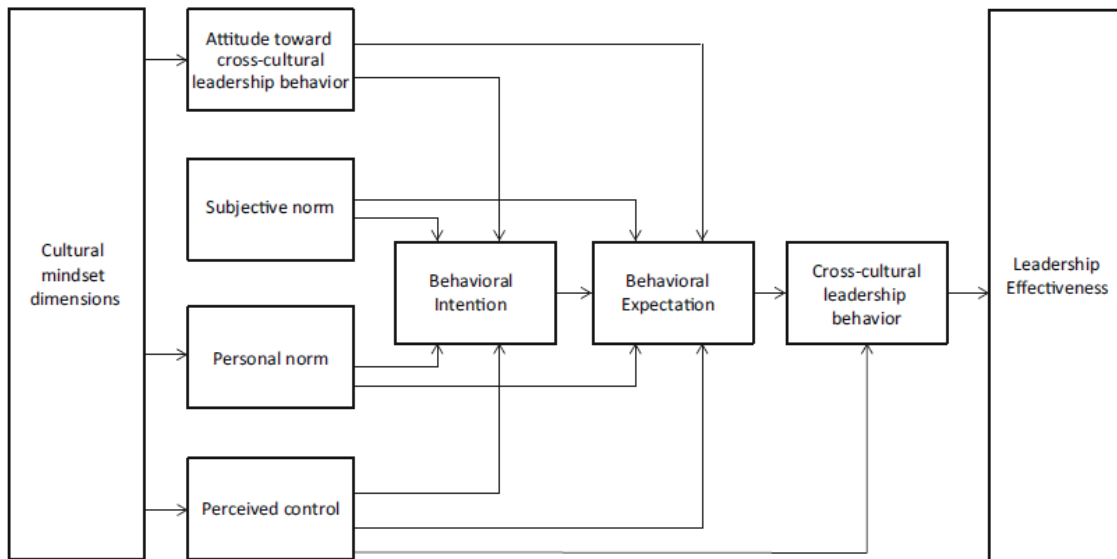


Fig. 3: (Dekker, 2016)

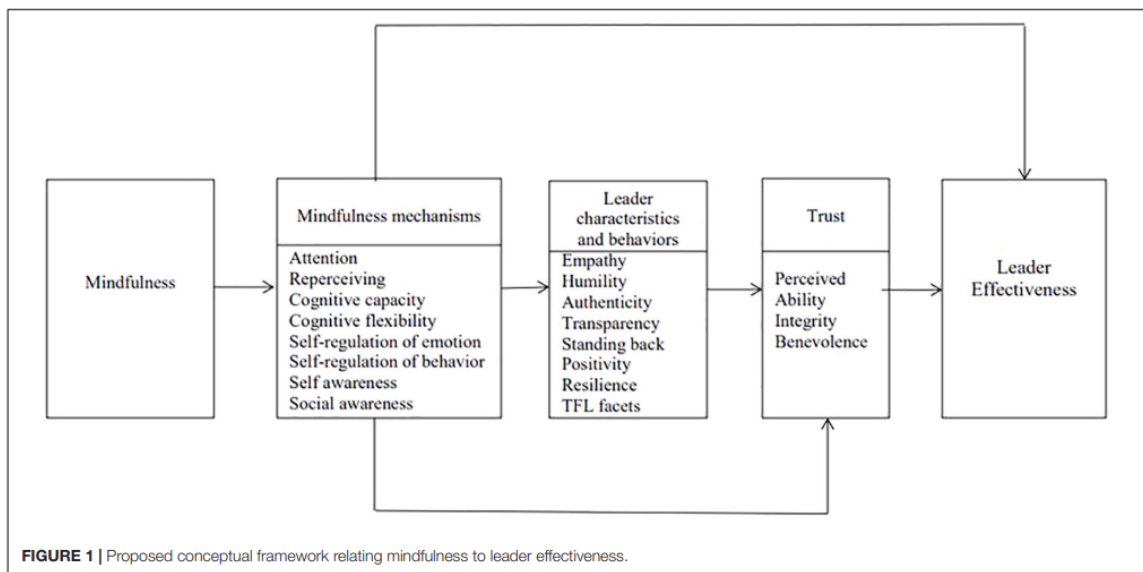


Fig. 4: Source: (Stedham and Skaar, 2019)

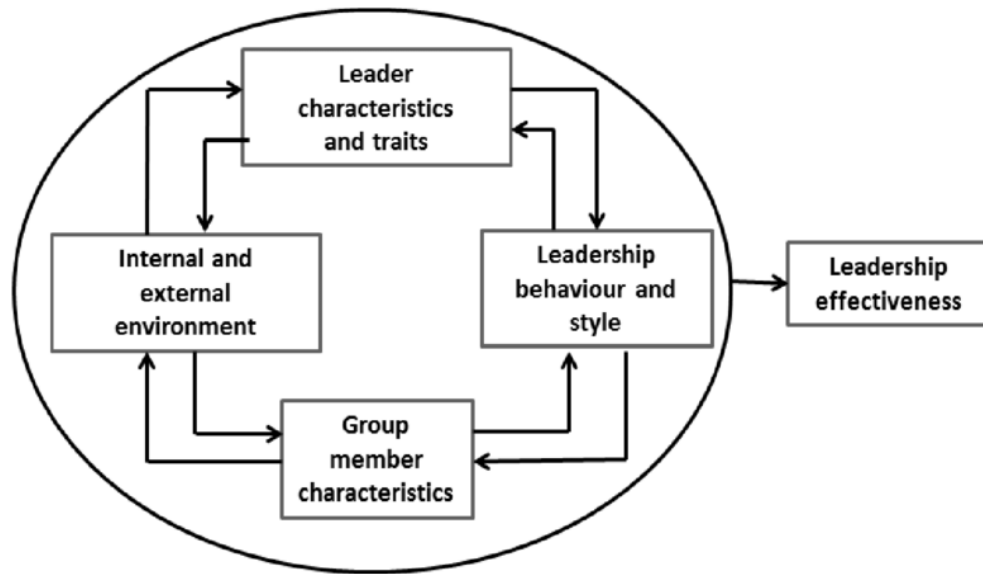


Fig 5: Source: (Robbins, 1997)

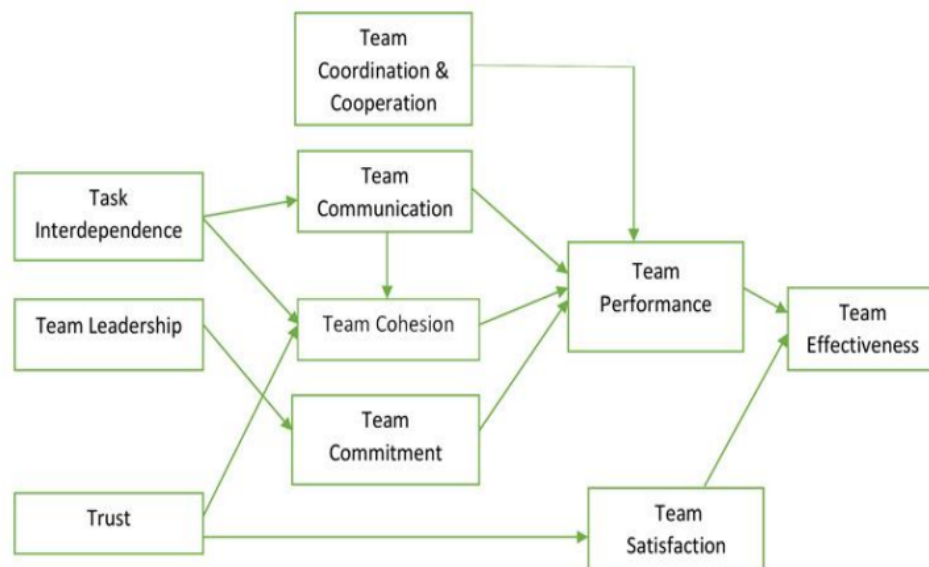


Fig. 2: A proposed conceptual model of team effectiveness

Fig. 6: Source: (Mohammed Hussein et al., 2018)

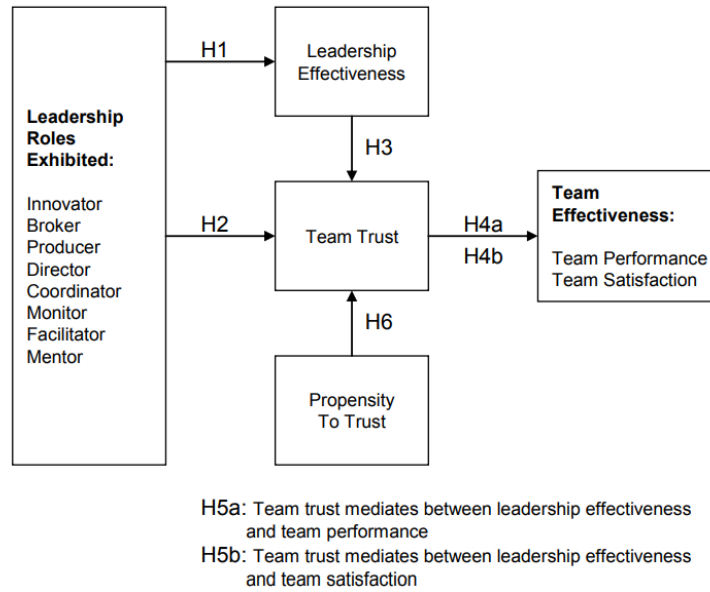


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

Fig.7: Source: (Chen, et. al, 2008)

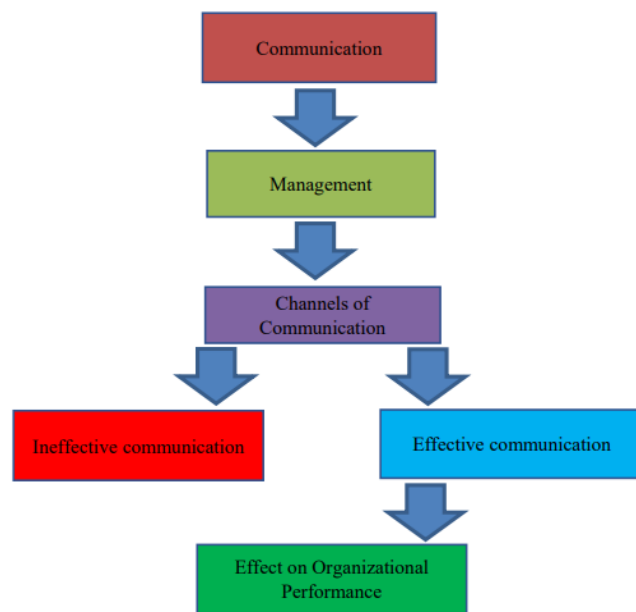


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Fig 8: Source: (Musheke and Phiri, 2021)

11.1 Employee interview questions

1. **Trust:** How would you rate the level of trust within your team? Can you provide specific examples or instances where trust has been built or eroded within your team? How do you perceive your leader's role in fostering trust within the team?

2. **Technology:** How effectively do you think the technology and communication tools used in your team facilitate your work and team communication? Are there any challenges or limitations with the current technology or communication tools? How do you perceive your leader's role in addressing these challenges?

3. **Clarity:** How well do you understand the goals, expectations, and roles within your team? Do you feel that the communication from your leader is clear and transparent? Are there any areas where you feel there is a lack of clarity? How do you perceive your leader's role in enhancing clarity within the team?

4. **Understanding:** How well do team members understand each other's perspectives, strengths, and weaknesses? Do you feel that team members actively seek to understand each other's viewpoints? How do you perceive your leader's role in fostering understanding among team members?

5. **Open Communication:** How open and transparent is the communication within your team? Do team members feel comfortable expressing their opinions, ideas, and concerns openly? How do you perceive your leader's role in promoting open communication within the team?

6. **Language/Fluency Gap:** Are there any language or fluency gaps within your team that impact communication and understanding? How do team members navigate these gaps? How do you perceive your leader's role in addressing language or fluency gaps within the team?

7. **Company Culture:** How would you describe the overall culture within your company, and how does it impact your team? Are there any cultural aspects that influence team dynamics or communication? How do you perceive your leader's role in managing and aligning team dynamics with the company culture?

8. **Leadership Style:** How would you describe your leader's leadership style and its impact on your team? Are there any specific leadership behaviors or approaches that you find effective or ineffective in your team? How do you perceive your leader's role in shaping the team's effectiveness through their leadership style?

9. **Cultural Background:** How do you perceive the impact of cultural differences (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, background) among team members and your leader on team effectiveness? Are there any specific instances or examples where cultural differences have influenced team dynamics or communication within the team? How do you perceive your leader's role in managing and leveraging cultural diversity within the team?

11.2 Leader interview questions

Trust: How do you establish and maintain trust within your team? What actions or behaviors do you demonstrate to build trust among team members, and how do you ensure that trust is maintained over time?

1. **Leadership Style:** How would you describe your leadership style, and how do you believe it affects team effectiveness? Are there any specific aspects of your leadership style that you consciously work on to positively impact the team and its performance?

2. **Open Communication:** How do you promote open communication within the team? What communication channels or tools do you use, and how do you encourage team members to share their thoughts, ideas, and concerns openly?

3. **Language/Fluency Gap:** How do you manage language or fluency gaps among team members, if any? How do you ensure that language differences do not hinder effective communication and understanding within the team?

4. **Understanding:** How do you ensure that team members have a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and tasks? How do you promote shared understanding among team members to align their efforts towards team goals?

5. **Clarity:** How do you provide clarity in terms of team goals, expectations, and performance feedback? How do you ensure that team members have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and how their contributions align with team objectives?

6. **Technological Support:** How do you leverage technology to support team effectiveness? What tools, resources, or platforms do you use to facilitate communication, coordination, and collaboration among team members?

7. Cultural Background: How do you manage and leverage cultural differences among team members to enhance team effectiveness? How do you promote inclusivity and respect for diverse cultural backgrounds within the team?

8. Company Characteristics: How do you consider the unique characteristics of the company, such as its values, mission, and culture, in your leadership approach? How do these company characteristics influence your decision-making processes and team dynamics?

12. Interview Transcript

12.1 Interview n.1 (Maria; 53 y/o, Slovakia)

Lenka:

Thank you for joining me. I'm doing I'm currently working on a master's this with focus on leadership and I'm really excited to chat with you about this topic. Just to let you know our conversation will be strictly confidential and we will go through nine different elements of leadership and collaboration within dispersed team. The first element I would like to talk to you about is trust. How would you rate the level of trust within your team?

Maria:

In general, I would say uh quite high. Especially towards our manager who is a very let's say trustworthy and reliable person. She also provides quite clear guidance for us when it comes to productivity when working from home. But on the other hand, also understands when you need I don't know half an hour break during working hours to deal with some private matters. As long as you communicate clearly and deliver on your productivity at work of course.

Lenka:

Can you provide some specific examples where the trust has been built or eroded within your team?

Maria:

Let's start with the hiccups we also had a colleague who thought working from home means basically being on vacation. Or just in standby mode uh while you can do cooking cleaning everything or whatever you want at home. And this colleague somehow managed to go along with this for a few weeks and then we started to feel like a team because of decreased productivity. He was not picking up the tasks to solve the customer requests which then had to be covered by the other team members. On the other hand, this was also kind of an example of how the trust has been rebuilt. Because when the lady discovered that this person is not doing much then let's say aligned inside the team. She asked if we all noticed this kind of behavior from the slacker. Then we already felt quite safe approaching our manager. The manager then really confirmed the good basis of trust when she took up the hint, but also did not disclose to a slacker colleague where did this come from. So in the end, we could all feel safe within the team. She dealt with him in a constructive way so then he also understood that this is not the way we do things here and got the chance to adjust his working habits and start working again. For me that's an example of trust you can have between your leader and you. Even if you mess up there is an opportunity to fix it.

Lenka:

Even taking into consideration this example. What do you perceive your leader's role is in fostering the trust within the team?

Maria:

For me, it's mostly about the leader communicating clearly the expectations. Like what are the things that need to be done and taken care of? Also stating clearly what is not accepted what kind of behaviors or lack of results and so on. So we as a team have a clear notion of what is expected and what is not tolerated. On top of these measurable aspects, I would say also creating an atmosphere where you are allowed or rather even encouraged to come up with any kind of work-related issues you are facing and you can openly speak about them. Also, come up with proposals on how things can be done in a different more effective way, or also that you are allowed to come up with pointing out things that do not work without the risk of being reprimanded or basically getting hit when you say something, someone doesn't want to be said out loud.

Lenka:

How would you then compare the trust between the team when you used to work together and now when it's remote?

Maria:

It's being more conscious and consistent with the habits we already had. Meaning if you have a worry or you have an idea in your head before working remotely we could exchange these over a coffee or over lunch. Now this is a bit more difficult so you just have to keep in mind that only working remotely doesn't take away from you the opportunity to actually speak up or interact with your with your colleagues. In general, I'd say the overall level of trust is about the same. It went down with some colleagues with whom I only naturally interact when I see them because there is nothing to talk about, only in a more structured or blunt manner. This is where the consciousness about creating opportunities comes in. With those with whom I interact more often there, it's really just changed from seeing the person in person to video chatting. So on average, I would say that we now realized at the approximately same level as before.

Lenka:

Thank you a lot for that! So then the second point or element would be technology. How efficiently do you think the technology and communication tools used in your team facilitate your work?

Maria:

I say it's a key enabler for remote work. Because you need to stay connected in an efficient way. So communication doesn't come as another hurdle you have to overcome, but it's just a different means of communication. I'd say instant messaging and especially video chats are the key, especially in our team. It was funny in the beginning when not everyone felt comfortable enough to turn on the camera during meetings. But it does really play a key role to also see your colleagues. To be able to see your colleagues drink coffee and so on. So we need some tool to basically virtually bring us back to the coffee room and let us either check-in in a group or even one-to-one. And of course, for this, you know something that works and doesn't break so often. Because I mean you can laugh about but it at the beginning of each meeting: Do you hear me? Do you hear me? Can you see me? Yes, we can hear you but cannot see you...and so on. It's funny at the beginning but eventually, you have to be careful that the technology works and it's not cutting from your productivity time. And that's not preventing

you from trying to reach out to someone because you expect it to fail and be annoyed by the problems, so you don't even try out to call someone.

Lenka:

OK so you mentioned the the problems with the technology and with the connection. What's your leaders role in addressing these challenges?

Maria:

Well, my point of view is that the leader should be using the same technology as the team is using. So, they can connect on the same level plus the leader knows what it means on the practical level for the team to be using the technology. Not just dropping it into their laps and saying you learn yourself it's super easy, but also to know what it means to use the technology and to be aware of technical issues. Also, take the issue seriously and not just tell their employees to report it in the normal way but really to take care that the issues are solved. Because this is how you then feel supported by your manager. It's the leader's role to enable and ensure that the employees have all the means needed for productive work.

Lenka:

The 3rd element about working remotely and in a dispersed team would be clarity. How well do you understand the goals, expectations, and roles within your team?

Maria:

Basically, it's always about the content or should be about the content of the communication and not about how you deliver the message. But we have noticed once starting to work as a dispersed team that also you need the proper means of delivery. The short version would be if you find the right way how to deliver the message it's basically no different from working altogether in one building because it's about content. Different people need different I'd say means of delivery. For someone who is very objectives-oriented, and e-mail is completely enough when it comes to communicating the expected outcome of a project. On the other hand, others might need more direct interaction and be able to ask questions. This is no change from working altogether and you, as a leader, just have to find the balance and correct style of communication to the composition of the team.

Lenka:

Taking into consideration exactly as you mentioned different means of passing through the message. How clearly is your leader communicating to you personally or to the whole team?

Maria:

I would personally rate her 10 out of 10. Because we have been working together for quite some time and I think we are quite on the same level of understanding. When it comes to expectations mm-hmm and communication of the expectations, I would have to write on the whole team level I'd say 8 out of 10. There are also colleagues who are scared to ask questions and sometimes with the remote setting do not feel secure. Or not secure it's not that they don't want to disrupt the flow of the meeting. When we are doing it in person then they catch up with her afterward which you cannot do in the remote setting or not always. I personally don't know how if I were in her place how to make it better. Because either you want to ask a question when you have the space or not. You cannot really cater to the very specific needs of everyone especially in a team because ours because we are almost 20 people. I don't think you can even do it even if we worked together on-site. I think she is doing great in her role because she is again communicating clearly and objectively. We know what is expected and what is not expected, so give a good example and a non-favorable example. Even KPIs if there are any. Oh, and ideally also not only deliver it verbally but in writing, so everyone can relate to that. These should be unambiguous so when two people from the same team have a look at it, they should be able to come up with basically the same understanding of what is the target. In our specific case as I said I'm quite satisfied with her approach I'm not saying it works all the time but uh with the size of the team and the diversity we have, I think it's very good.

Lenka:

The next one would be a little bit connected to what we already talked about. I would like to talk about understanding. But this time not only understanding the message itself but understanding also each other 's perspectives strengths and weaknesses. Just to explain where the question is coming from: If you understand each other 's perspective, and background it's easier to decipher what the other person means when they are putting something into the writing. So how well do you think the team members are understanding each other?

Maria:

I like very much what you said in the intro I because it depends heavily on how the person is able to communicate and where they're coming from. Or if you have been working with someone for a long time, so we know each other or it's a newcomer. In our team, I'd say it's about 50/50. Some colleagues are so deep in their specific work tasks, that I struggle to understand clearly what they are asking about. Or I have a different understanding of something they call the same names, so my mind then jumps somewhere else. This is also why I try to always be mindful of the time of others so as not to speak too much about the background but keep at least some of the direction of where I'm coming from.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in team understanding?

Maria:

I think this is one of the few areas where I think she could improve what she's doing. Because we often hear that we should be looking out of our own small area that we working. Though she addresses it verbally but um and they don't know how to how to reach it. But what I would find more helpful is to actually practice this in daily tasks, so like it's good that we should also be looking out of I don't know a segment of policy administration tasks. How do you do that when you have twenty other tasks to be done by the end of the work day? Hmm you know like it's she's addressing it so I think she's aware of it but it's still more on the verbal level than practical.

Lenka:

OK thank you. So coming up next is open communication. How open and transparent is the communication within your team?

Maria:

I would say that at least from my perspective the team leader is very open. Especially in a one-on-one setting so bilateral or in a very small round with people. I think we have very open communication with no repercussions, and you are allowed or able to speak freely. Within the team, there are of course some boundaries or topics you naturally do not want to discuss. But even with the team set up I still perceive it as quite open communication but there are topics where you don't want to be too much open with a big audience.

Lenka:

Do you think the team members feel comfortable in expressing either their opinions or ideas , or concerns openly?

Maria:

In general yes. However, they are or rather we are less open about controversial topics. When it is discussed within the whole team level. It's not about not being able to speak up but it's rather you don't know where your statement in which form could end up in the end. Even with good intention so on controversial topics we are all more cautious which makes sense I think.

Lenka:

What did the leader do, to foster good communication within a team?

Maria:

In our specific case, I'd say it was challenging. The leader fostered more open communication because it wasn't always this open. So when she took over the team's leadership, her actions, along with her open communication about difficult topics like team restructuring or task changes, set a good precedent. I think the leader's role is crucial. From my personal experience, what is important, and what could be improved in our team, is that it's also on the leader's shoulders to address comments that border on being attacking or impolite towards other team members. There needs to be a balance between open discussion and respect. It's key to invite everyone to have an open discussion, but when you hear such comments from some team members, it's necessary to intervene to prevent others from feeling attacked. This is something our leader needs to work on, finding the balance between keeping the conversation open but not allowing hurtful comments. The debate can unintentionally veer in a direction you don't want to go as a leader. This has happened in some of our sessions, leading to decreased productivity and losing the meeting's main purpose. Sometimes the intended message gets diluted due to overly open comments. Diversions in discussions can occur in both virtual and in-person meetings. In my experience, virtual meetings tend to be more orderly, while such diversions are more likely to happen in the impersonal setting. So, in this regard, the remote setting might work better for us, depending on the topic.

Lenka:

And then this brings me to another point, being language or fluency gap. Since your leader is Polish, are there any language or fluency gaps within your team that impact communication and understanding?

Maria:

Oh yes definitely especially with the more shy people that are trying to be perfect in their communication. Then fortunately for us the languages are very close the main fluency gap is on an internal vocabulary used for specific processes in the insurance setup. So we sometimes need to explain to each other what we mean by that what, because in the other country they used different expression or word.

Lenka:

How often do you find that there has been some kind of misunderstanding because of some language differences?

Maria:

It was more frequent at the beginning when we needed to get used to each other. Also, because then it was not only about language but also, I would say using the language differences to show personal disfavor towards the new leader. You know some people used it against her. It's clear that you have a misunderstanding, but you don't want to correct her or explain yourself because then it's easier you know later on to say but you did not understand. Overtime we also overcame this, but I would also link it to the trust she was able to build towards her. It's not that bad now we even created a small teamwork vocabulary. How you say things or what is the common wording for this or that in Czech and what in Slovak.

Lenka:

What was the leaders role in addressing this discrepancies in in language or fluency gaps?

Maria:

Firstly, she was very very clear that the difference is there. Not trying to avoid the confrontation or pretend that it's the same. Acknowledging it also most actively asking for confirmation if she understands correctly. And basically also demonstrate for the others that it's

OK to ask for confirmation or not be sure. That's all that came to my mind at the moment. And also that we expect continuous improvement but not everything being super clear from one day to another.

Lenka:

Another topic is very much connected to the language, and it is cultural background. How do you perceive the impact of cultural differences?

Maria:

It's hard to judge because the cultures are not that different between our countries. I rather see it in other individual team members level with the background they are coming from. Or level of education and so on, but not on the cultural level strictly speaking. I mean in Czechia the company culture is more open than Slovakia. So for us it took a bit more time to really be comfortable speaking openly in workplace. This was her positive impact. But also she had to get used to the fact that it doesn't come so easily and naturally to some members in our team to speak openly. Needed some kind of practical demonstration to show that it's OK to speak up. This might be the only cultural difference

Lenka:

That also is connected to the next point and that is company cultural itself. So not necessarily where you come from, but how is the climate in the workspace. How would you describe the overall cultural?

Maria:

One thing to understand first, it the background of the company culture. You should also be aware of the size of the company and some kind of a history. As I mentioned before the culture in Czechia is slightly more open and more relaxed, at least from the point of view. But that is coming from the fact that THE COMPANY in Slovakia is basically an older company so has been on the market for a long time. Basically THE COMPANY bought an old insurance company with their portfolio with their people. Therefore, it was not a starting on the green field, but picking up the legacy of the other company which had their own culture ,which was not really open. This comes up also with the fact that the average age of employees in Czechia is much lower, than in Slovakia. Especially for example in our team when I joined the average age was about 45. So you have people with different company cultural to not being able to

speaking up openly. Which is different than in Czech Republic. But I mean we are rather getting closer to the culture that is in Czech.

Lenka:

Coming up next, as the very last and finalizing point is leadership style. So in each of these points I always asked you about what was the role of leader and what did leader did in these various situations. Having said all of that how would you describe your leaders leadership style and its impact on your team?

Maria:

I think it goes a lot in the direction of collaborative leadership. She is asking for our input on topics where we have more functional expertise let's say. Or when something needs to be aligned on a team level she is not enforcing it with the strength of rules or commands and so on. I appreciate that very much and it goes hand in hand with open communication which we touched upon. I think this was her communication style and being open about discussing difficult topics. This is something I think helped very much to improve the communication, openness and honesty in our team.

Lenka:

So this is something you find that is effective in the team. Is there something some approaches or behaviors from the leader' side that you find ineffective or you think that could be better?

Maria:

Sometimes she tries to be too collaborative. In my point of view too soft. This was for example what we discussed before. Like if you have a borderline rude discussion or someone speaking loudly in a bigger forum then she still lacks the skill, or I don't know how to call it, to put a stop to it. At that point I would appreciate more strict communication and like coming from the top signal that this is not appreciated.

Lenka:

How do you perceive the leaders role in shaping the effectiveness throughout their leadership style?

Maria:

That's super important especially in today's time when you have a ton of emails from meetings new information coming from each direction so it's easy to get lost or lose the message so there I'd say it's key for each leader not just ours to be able to go to the point skip the big round context but not to spend too much time on this is the only formation or debates that are not needed and this is sort of effectiveness means for me communication

Lenka:

Do you think that there is something important in this topic that we haven't addressed yet?

Maria:

I'd say what improved our collaboration as a team or also reaching a result was when we appointed a specific day in a week to meet in the office. So we also have a day when we can exchange in person. Which then also helps a bit more to get out of your cozy Home Office and get you more into the previous office only mindset a little bit.

Lenka:

Thank you, a lot, for your time, that was my last question.

12.2 Interview n.2 (Boris; 39y/o, Slovakia)

Lenka:

So we're gonna discuss nine elements of leadership in a remote team and the first element being a trust. So how would you rate the level of trust within your team ?

Boris:

OK since I was fully working remotely in the team I was actually never met my team leader, before the end of COVID pandemic. So that was quite not confusing but it was quite hard for me to build the one-to-one trust. Because it was always online so yeah there were some situations. I know it also from my previous work that if you have a one to one or personal connection with the person it's always better to communicate. There and you can build a better

trust there so from this perspective I would put it somewhere in the middle, as there may be some situations that I wasn't 100% fully trusting to my team leader.

Lenka:

Can you think about some examples of building or losing trust within a team?

Boris:

Yes, uh when the project went the right direction, that everything was fine and then also the trust in the team was OK. There were like no conflict in the online work environment and all was fine. But when there were first problems or some issues or errors then I was uh not fully trusting to my team leader. Because she was not the one who would like to resolve the conflict. She was always trying to “be nice” and but I lacked the firmness of the decision. She could address those but in a way. I had a feeling that she was trying to not offend anyone so sometimes the conflict would last longer than it could have in my opinion, because we were going in circles. That's the time when my trust level went down because I didn't have trust to her managing skills yeah so maybe that was the situation I was feeling it the most

Lenka:

What was the leader's role in trying to build a trust?

Boris:

From my perspective, it was also something new to her. To involve a new person into the team when he was fully online, and we never met face to face the other team members. At that time, it would be very helpful to have some kind of offsite or something similar to meet the colleagues, but it was not possible due to COVID, which made things much more complicated. She brought that topic up a couple of times but unfortunately due to the situation I was the only one that didn't meet the leader and colleagues at the beginning. This made things more complicated for me, since others already knew each other for some time and also knew the leader from back when they were working from the office. It was easier to trust her for them I think but on the other side I realized the leader was trying to stay in touch with me more and have more and personal catch ups or online coffees to compensate for that which I appreciated a lot.

Lenka:

Thank you for that! The second element is technology. Especially when working online the technology is a big part of how to collaborate with your colleagues and how to communicate with your leader. So how effectively do you think the technology and communication tools used in your team facilitate your work and team communication?

Boris:

Oh yeah I think there are always certain issues and place to improvement but I think also the tools that we are using improved during the corona times. Before it was like maybe one channel of communication. But during the COVID it became the main source. So also the channels like Microsoft teams also Webexor all the channels improve themselves and become a better communication tools. I think not only for our team but also for other teams so in this area I see that there are still maybe some problems for the product but the improvement was definitely there.

Lenka:

Having so many communication channels, how do you navigate which one to use at what time?

Boris:

Yes, on the other hand more channels we have the more complicated it gets when it comes to following up on tasks and all messages across all the platforms. Personally, in our case or at least in my case the main tool for the communication was teams, as this was also communicated by the leader. Since I was used to using Teams, it was easy. But there were some cases with other maybe little bit older colleagues, when learning a new functionality of the channel was a little bit more challenging. For this purpose our leader set up a knowledge exchange and best practice sharing within our team and even if someone needed help we would “buddy up” so then everyone that needed it felt supported. At the beginning it was sometimes hard for me to manage my calendar because it wasn't connected in the in the right way so I wasn't able to see the meeting in my calendar or my colleagues were not able to see it. So to manage the working time uh was quite hard managed. But later on we communicated this issue with our leader and made a team decision with her support to use only certain communication tools for certain purposes, to decrease the complexity and be as effective as possible.

Lenka:

OK so the then the Third Point I would like to discuss is clarity within your team but also a clarity of communication with your leader. So from your perspective how well do you understand the goals the expectations and roles within your team?

Boris:

The communication I think it was clear uh also the roles and responsibilities were set up before I came. And also I know what were my responsibilities. Maybe there were some cases that I wasn't aware who will be responsible for what, but after maybe some meetings it was more clear who will be responsible for what.

Lenka:

Are there any areas where we feel there is a lack of transfer of clarity?

Boris:

To be honest I'm not aware of this one. I think it was always quite clear what our tasks were as they were communicated clearly and transparently, and it was quite easy for me as a new joiner to jump on that train and catch up and understand what is going on, what are we doing. Here I would say it was thanks to not only leader but also the other team members as they were quite welcoming and helpful.

Lenka:

What would you think is your leaders role in enhancing the clarity within the team?

Boris:

Most of the time I think she was she was promoting the transparency and clear communication. She was also the one that was uh somehow moving this forward hmm but it is the right approach. There were maybe some cases that we were not sure then it was not 100% transparent. But after we communicated the worry to the leader she clarified. The only instance I can think of when she was not transparent when she was trying to maybe prevent some panic or so, but that I can understand.

Lenka:

This brings me to our next point which is understanding. So how well the team members understand each other perspectives strengths and weaknesses, viewpoints?

Boris:

As I said in beginning that I was working fully online. So we had like a team chat talking also about different topics. Not only discussing business of course. But I never built such like really deep relationship between the other team members. Maybe it was about that we just didn't click, but for sure not being able to meet in person and get to know each other was a big problem for me as well. Maybe not only me but also everyone has a different status communication so it means that if you know the colleague personally, then it's easier to understand when he's making a joke or he means it like in a polite way not in a rude way. Sometimes it's really hard to figure out the emotion from the e-mail or from the teams communication but if you know the person then it's easier to understand. OK he doesn't mean it like this because at least if I met him once. I can then decipher what they are saying better. So only by reading email I cannot completely understand what they are thinking, they are trying to be funny or they are offended, or what is actually going on behind that keyboard on the other side.

Lenka:

The 5th point I think it's quite similar to what we already talked about and it's open communication. How open and transparent is the communication with your team?

Boris:

It is quite open. I can freely express my thought on the things that I was not happy with, also the things that I was happy with. I believe I always actually provided structural feedback. On the other hand I am not sure I was always heard. Not because I could not speak up, just because when I raised some issue nothing was done to fix it. We acknowledged it, the leader said yes I get your point and I understand, but no actions were taken which was quite frustrating for me.

Lenka:

Do you feel comfortable expressing yourself when you are in a team?

Boris:

I would say that it depends on the person that I was communicating with. In general, I had an ok relationship with all of them and I didn't feel uncomfortable to speak up. Our boss also encouraged it, but at the end of the day I knew I cannot tell everything to everyone, because I had a different connection with each teammate. But still it was the online connections, so it was hard to it's also true one. But I think yes but they were maybe some people in the team that I was always trying to avoid but to just communicating the necessary level.

Lenka:

And then coming up next is the language and fluency gap. I understand your team is consist of Czechs and Slovaks, with Polish leader. Are there any language or fluency gaps between your team that impact the communication and understanding?

Boris:

Not really. But I think that at least it is my view that people from Slovakia more often understand the Czechs than other way around. So, from my point I'm not aware of any hiccups. If there was something maybe then yeah, I would use Google translator or whatever tool like that to translate the word, if I wasn't sure what it actually means just to prevent some misunderstanding.

Lenka:

I know your team lead is from Poland but learning Slovak language. Is it creating any problems witint the team?

Boris:

First of all it is important to mention that not all the team members do speak perfect English. But if there is something that she struggles with when it comes to pronunciation, or she cannot remember how one of the words or expressions are said she would just say it in English and then we would translate it for her. At the beginning I thought it will create more problems. But after a while I found it very nice that she is trying to learn our language and therefore understand us a little bit better. In a way it would even bring us closer together because even though she was our boss she would allow us to see her in this vulnerable position

asking for a help on how to say different words. But I am not aware of any difficulties or misunderstanding coming from the language barrier.

Lenka:

So now with the language we also need to address the culture. In the cultural mix of Slovakia and Czechia and Poland. How do you perceive the impact of differences among the team and your leader?

Boris:

I can only provide very subjective view to this point. I think people from Slovakia in our team they were more OK with everything. More chill and easy going I would say. I mean with the tasks and with the results and so on. So at least for my personal view, the Czech colleagues are like more uhm...Not only arguing but disappointed all the time with the situation. I'm sorry I don't know the right word. They are easily let down and seem more unhappy with all the situation in the company and so on. They were still pointing out the negatives and mind that it was still in an online environment. When it comes to the leader, I don't think there are any differences that made me nervous or uncomfortable we are still quite close culturally plus since there is only one leader and we are not meeting everyday it is not so obvious.

Lenka:

And what was your leader's role in managing and leveraging this kind of situation and the the cultural differences?

Boris:

I think in this specific case she was trying to calm down the situation and was working to see what can be done. On the other hand, I felt that the issues were not moving as quickly as we would like. I think she also got frustrated because there was just so much, she could do with the middle management position to fix some issues we were unhappy about. But then maybe if she was more proactive it would be moving more, I don't know.

Lenka:

Now I would be happy to hear something about the company culture. How would you describe the overall culture within your company and its impact on your team?

Boris:

There has been some change or at least the attempts of changing the culture a little bit from the Slovak perspective. The goal was to make the company more open, open minded as the company history is quite long and this made it to be so rigid sometimes. There were some organizational changes since starting to work closely with THE COMPANY Czechia, so it was also like changing of the company culture. But I think not enough, or at least not such a huge change as was communicated by the company. Maybe this was like longer frustration within the company from the older members because especially those colleagues didn't really appreciate the change and the cultural shift.

Lenka:

Uh so then the last point is the leadership style and talk about the team lead herself. How would you describe her leadership style?

Boris:

I would say it was very important for her to let us know that the hierarchy is very flat, and she likes it this way. She was promoting a lot of free communication and making sure everyone is being heard. Having said that, we were also getting a lot of responsibilities and we had to take ownership of the topic she gave us which was good and bad. Good because we had a freedom to do it our way and she was not micromanaging us, but on the other hand sometime I was thinking whether she is not doing it because she doesn't not really understand the topic that well.

Lenka:

Are there any important topics or areas you think we didn't cover?

Boris:

I think it is very important to mention my onboarding, as this was such a new experience not only for me but for the leader and the rest of the team as well. Coming to the team I was quite worried how it is going to be since we couldn't meet and get to know each other, but also the technical view of the onboarding. This was something I appreciated very much. I was sent all the equipment my laptop, mouse to my home address with a welcome drink. Even got like good luck and try to survive Covid with us guide with a different recipe

which was very nice. I had a nice and welcoming beginning which shocked me a little bit because I was expecting the worse. Even setting up the system and everything was very well organized and even though I would prefer to get in touch with the leader sooner, after the setup it was all going great. Second point it that from my perspective it's really good to have at least one person like a buddy. My buddy was a senior teammate which helped me to understand the going's of the company and our tasks much better and quicker, as this was my worry at the beginning knowing I will not be able to meet any of the colleagues in person.

Lenka:

Thank you then it was my last question thank you again for your time and your responses!

12.3 Interview n.3 (Veronika; 31y/o, Czechia)

Lenka:

I'm doing my masters thesis on leadership in dispersed teams and I'm really excited to chat with you about it today just to let you know our conversation will be strictly confidential and we'll be discussing 9 different elements of leadership in the remote team. Find the first aspect I would like to discuss with you or ask you about is trust so how would you and and particularly we are talking about trust within your team so how would you rate the level of trust within your team can you provide specific examples for instances where the trust has been built or eroded within your team

Veronika:

Yep, it's quite hard to evaluate on a team level because, for me, it worked more on individuals from the team. So, for me, we had one of the colleagues who we really trusted, and therefore, we had a very high level of trust. For me, it was helpful that we somehow clicked on a personal level. So, going from there, we were able to transfer that trust to our working relationship. If we agreed upon something, I knew I could count on him, and the other way around. And if there was some trouble, thanks to this easy personal relationship, I had no problems dealing with it. I was not worried about any problems or backstabbing from other team members. It was more technical since we were not able to meet, and I was new to the

team. So, it was good but not as good as with this colleague. We had some level of trust. We had reviews of the tasks we agreed upon, but that was a normal procedure for us to discuss the task before finishing, to ensure that it's well prepared and ready to be delivered to the customer. It's like a rule of "four eyes" or something like that. So, we always had a colleague that we discussed with. It was not on a superior and subordinate level; it was mostly on a peer level, but making sure that we had high-quality output. We were doing these reviews, and for that, we had a good enough level of trust. And there were no instances where it was used against me, even if there were some mistakes. So, I considered that a really good foundation for trust.

Lenka:

And how would you perceive your leaders role in building and fostering the **trust** within the team?

Veronika:

Are you asking if I can separate the influence of the leader from my own personality traits in terms of trust? It's really hard for me to separate the two because I know that I'm a very trusting person. I usually trust people until proven otherwise. I don't wait to build trust; it's more like my default version. I ask myself, "Why should I not trust these people? They are my colleagues, and we are working towards the same goal." So, I'm not sure how much of that trust was influenced by the leader's actions, and how much of it was due to my own personality traits. I don't think it's even possible to separate the two because I can't imagine how a different person in my situation would act. That's why I'm saying the environment I came into was really good, and I haven't witnessed any distrust among other team members. So, it probably has something to do with the leader, but for me personally, trust comes naturally.

Lenka:

The second element is **technology**. How efficiently do you think the technology and communication tools used in your team facilitated your work and communication?

Veronika:

I think the main limitation I experienced was during the brainstorming. This limitation was more noticeable after the restrictions were lifted in this company, and perhaps even in previous companies. When it comes to the ideation process, being in the same room and having a physical whiteboard or dashboard to draw on makes things easier. Locking yourself in a room

for this ideation process can really help speed up the process. Even though we were trying to simulate this process online, sitting in front of a computer and using digital tools that are similar to whiteboards is just not the same experience. As for the tasks themselves, I think the technology we had was sufficient. The only limitations arose when someone had internet connectivity issues. However, we found tools that allowed us to have video calls and draw on each other's screens, so if someone was explaining something to me or vice versa, we were able to pinpoint the location on the screen and collaborate effectively. So, we had no problems with that aspect.

Lenka:

And what do you think was the leader's role in addressing these challenges?

Veronika:

She was actively addressing the challenges and trying to find solutions. She would proactively search for tools that could potentially help us, and she would recommend them to us. For example, she would say, "Have you seen this? Maybe this would help with the problem you described to me." Additionally, when we found a tool that seemed suitable, she would assist us in pushing it forward within the company, even if it required budget allocation for a paid tool. She was really helpful in ensuring that we gained access to the necessary tools and resources to overcome the limitations we were facing.

Lenka:

So, the third point is clarity, and the question is how well do you understand the goals and expectations within your team?

Veronika:

She was trying to inform us as soon as possible of all changes, limitations to office hours, etc., and also, yeah, maybe if this were my first work experience, it would be much harder. But for me, it was not. I was already working for almost five- six years before that, so I did not need really detailed specifications for tasks, routine, etc. So it was clear to me. And I'm not sure how junior colleagues would act in such a situation because it was quite challenging, I admit, to join the company when you are just receiving some instructions online, etc., and never meeting the team in person, so we don't have the clarity, it's not easy. But what has helped is that she made herself available for any questions. So when I had questions, I felt that I

could ask them immediately, and she was never annoyed by them, etc. So that was quite a good support for me because I'm not afraid of asking. Hmm, so this advantage for me, but she was really open to that, so I never encountered a closed door

Lenka:

We are almost approaching half of the interview. The next point I think is very closely connected to what you mentioned, and it is open communication. So, how open and transparent is the communication within the team?

Veronika:

Well, in terms of the team, I think she's trying to build an open environment where everybody can speak. Still, you can see personal differences between people. For example, I am very open and express my mind unless there is really huge pressure on me that prevents me from speaking. I feel comfortable asking questions and raising concerns, unless there is a significant reason to hold back. It's easy for me to do this, and I don't have to force myself. However, you can clearly see these differences within the team. Some people are naturally more vocal, and the leader encourages them. But for some people, it might not be enough because they can hide behind their computers and never express themselves. I'm not sure how the leader could support it better. I'm not saying she's doing it in a bad way, but some people would never raise any concerns, and maybe they don't even think about how it could be better. They might not have any concerns because they're used to doing things a certain way and think it's fine. So, you can see the differences in how they raise questions, concerns, or communicate clearly. It really depends on the nature of the individuals.

Lenka:

I understand that your team consists of multiple nationalities. Are there any language or fluency gaps within your team that impact communication and understanding?

Veronika:

Even though we have two different languages, we can understand each other quite clearly. It's because we used to be one Republic, and we had a lot of TV shows only in one language. Especially for people from Slovakia, it's easy to understand the language then for younger Czechs. However, it's becoming more difficult to understand slang. But they can

switch to Czech when needed, and if we have a wider audience, the majority of the team does not have any problem.

Lenka:

Okay, so we have last points. The next one is **company culture**. How does company culture impact your team?

Veronika:

For the first half-year, it was hard for me to see the company culture since I was working from home and mainly working within my team. That was different from my previous experience. Later, I was able to connect and talk with some people. However, I cannot talk about everybody since I don't interact much with other teams. So, I cannot speak for the entire company in terms of goals or company culture. It really depends on the people. I have been in companies that were officially the most tolerant, but then you encounter one person who is against company policies. So, it really depends on individuals. I don't think it's just about the company stating its goals and policies. Unless it's something like sexual harassment, it won't have a significant impact unless individuals uphold it. Overall, it's nice and good for me, but I cannot speak for the whole company.

Lenka:

Then, how would you describe your **leader's leadership style** and its impact on your team?

Veronika:

The leadership style works really well for me because it doesn't seem hierarchical. It feels like we are almost equal. My boss was never bossy or micromanaging. If I had concerns, we could have open conversations. The main time I perceived her as my peer was when I needed some approval for vacations, etc. I really like that style and her approach.

Lenka:

What do you find effective and ineffective in your team from her perspective as a leader?

Veronika:

For me, distributing responsibility and ownership without micromanaging is something that really works and encourages people to act on their own. It comes with risks because you need to perform better, but it gives people more trust, making them more content in their work and delivering better results. However, for some team members, it might be hard to accept this level of ownership. They might need more help in defining smaller parts of their work, or they might have expected someone to give them a clear description of what needs to be done. With remote work, the ideation process was sometimes hard because you were alone in your ideation, and this higher level of ownership might not work if you are not in sync with your leader. It's like a disadvantage, but I'm glad for this level of responsibility and trust. Overall, I mainly see the advantages.

Lenka:

What about the leader's role in shaping the team's effectiveness when they give you so much trust, responsibility, and ownership over the topics you're taking care of?

Veronika:

The leader has regular meetings where she shares updates. She tracks the effectiveness, although I'm not deeply involved in that aspect. I believe that every team member tries to be as effective as possible. The leader's role is in asking the right questions at the right phase of the topic. That's her way of ensuring effectiveness. By asking the right questions, she obtains valuable and interesting information without having to specify every task.

Lenka:

Finally, how do you perceive the impact of **cultural differences**, whether it's nationality, ethnicity, between team members and your leader?

Veronika:

Well, you can see that there are some differences even between Czechs, Poles, and Slovaks. We are really similar but not the same. The mentality is different, so there are some things I would do differently or communicate differently. It wasn't a huge issue for me, but sometimes we needed to go through things more than once to come to a real understanding. At

first, we thought we understood each other, but it turned out not to be the case. So, there are some cultural differences between us.

Lenka:

What do you think the leader is doing to minimize those differences or find a common language?

Veronika:

I think in her communication about organizational issues, projects, or tasks, she tries to phrase things in a way that ensures we have the same understanding. Maybe she cannot change her culture, but she tries to ensure that we understand each other from the start.

Lenka:

Thank you. Is there something important we did not talk about regarding your leader and your team?

Veronika:

I think we covered most of it, from technical stuff to tools we have available and making sure we have everything we need. Some people asked about compensation for working from home or furniture for their home office, but I think it was out of the hands of the management. It was due to the global pandemic, and it was not their fault that we couldn't go to the office. I wasn't part of those discussions, but it was an issue at some point. Communication, team buildings, and team bonding activities are really nice to have, and overall, I think we have covered everything.

Lenka:

Perfect! Thank you so much for your time.

12.4 Interview n.4 (Radoslav; 43y/o, Czechia)

Lenka:

Hey! Nice to e-meet you and thank you for joining me for this interview.

Radoslav:

Hi! Nice to meet you as well!

Lenka:

So first of all as I mentioned before the interview I would like to assure you that your answer and the content of this interview is strictly confidential and will be only used for the purpose of this study.

Radoslav:

Ok. Thanks.

Lenka:

As a warm up question, can you introduce yourself?

Radoslav:

Of course, no problem. I am Radoslav and I am 43 years old. I am from the Czech republic, I have been working for the company for over 13 years. Before that I had a couple of other jobs in different areas - gardening, media productions, tourism, gastrology and others. Since Joining the company I have had several different positions within a couple of different teams. I joined the team which we could more or less call the current team a few years before all the restructuring and before joining forces with the Slovak colleagues. Additionally, I have known Agata, before she was appointed to lead our team.

Lenka:

Thank you! Now the first topic I would like to focus on is trust in your team. How would you rate the level of trust within your team?

Radoslav:

Absolutely! When it comes to trust in our team, I'd say it's pretty solid. I mean, we've got this open communication thing going on that, in my book, is like the secret sauce to making us work so well. You know what I mean? I really appreciate the fact that I can throw my ideas and concerns out there, whether it's in our team meetings or one-on-ones with my boss. It's like there's this perfect little window for me to share whatever's on my mind or get answers to my burning questions. And let me tell you, that's super beneficial because it makes me feel like my voice really matters, you know? Like, there's always a time and place for any information I

need to pass on or any question I want to throw out there. So, yeah, trust is kind of like the glue that holds us all together, and open communication vibe we've got going on, well, it's the secret recipe that makes us tick.

Lenka:

Do you have any examples or instances where trust has been built or eroded within your team?

Radoslav:

Personally I don't remember anything that would make me not trust my colleagues. But that is also because I don't really care about the unofficial politics in the backgrounds of the team and behind the curtain of the corporate culture. However, I have to admit that here and there, I hear rumours and notice strange reactions, that I do not believe and judge them right away. Usually I dismiss such things and don't contribute to them, but they prove that some sort of shadow politics is a little present in the team, and even more so in the company itself. I don't approve of this and I don't like the existence of not verbally expressed issues and I think it leads to people not trusting each other as much as they could. Here.... I said it.

Lenka: How do you perceive your leader's role in fostering trust within the team?

Radoslav:

Her main role is mainly setting up the system and fostering the notion. You know, being able to share my ideas or concerns, whether it's in our team meetings or those one-on-one chats with my boss. It's like having the perfect platform to spill the beans on whatever's on my mind or throw out questions that are bugging me. And honestly, that's a huge plus because it makes me feel like there's a time and place for every bit of info I want to dish out or any questions I want to toss around. I've got to give a shout-out to Agata. I seriously admire and appreciate her dedication to making sure she listens to each and every one of us. It's pretty awesome how she's right there in the middle of it all, making sure everyone's voice is heard.

Lenka:

How effectively do you think the technology and communication tools used in your team facilitate your work and team communication?

Radoslav:

Well, I've got to say, the technology we're using has been a real game-changer. Before the whole COVID situation, I was all about in-person discussions for even the tiniest questions or updates, you know? But once we dove into Teams during the pandemic, it totally flipped the script for me. Now, I'm way more comfortable shooting off quick questions or updates to my colleagues, whether they're in the same room or just a desk away. It's kind of wild how I used to think it was a waste of time to message someone right next to me, but now it feels like I'm not interrupting their work flow, and they can respond whenever it suits them. It's a two-way street, and I think it's improved our team communication without causing interruptions. However, on the either hand being a little bit old fashioned I would still prefer to meet my colleagues more often. I used to get coffees in the office and now it gets a little bit lonely sitting at my desk at home the whole day without the option for an informal office talk. Even though I like Teams and electronic communication I still prefer face to face if I can help it.

Lenka: Are there any challenges or limitations with the current technology or communication tools?

Radoslav:

Honestly, I don't really feel any limitations with the technology, but I think it's partly because of my mindset. I'm all about making the most of the options we have, rather than dwelling on what we don't. It's that "glass half full" perspective, you know?

Lenka:

How well do you understand the goals, expectations, and roles within your team?

Radoslav:

I'd say I'm pretty focused on my own tasks and deadlines, and I'm well aware of our team's overall goals. You see, it's crucial to maintain that sense of clarity in the daily hustle. As for the other roles within the team, I've taken the time to grasp them to the extent that's necessary for me to perform my job effectively. But honestly, I don't view this as a limitation whatsoever. It's more like having just the right amount of information at my fingertips within our team. And if anything ever gets a bit hazy or I need more context, well, I'm always just a question away from getting a clear picture. That's the beauty of our collaborative atmosphere – we're all here to support each other and ensure we're on the same page.

Lenka:

Do you feel that the communication from your leader is clear and transparent?

Radoslav:

Transparency in our team is something that's always felt pretty natural to me. I've never really had to think about it because it's woven into the fabric of how we work together. I've never had that feeling of there being a lack of transparency or anything like that. It creates an environment where trust and understanding thrive. So, I can't really complain in that department; it's been smooth sailing on the transparency front. And, you know, it's worth mentioning that it does take some time, especially in the early stages of building a team, to find that common ground. We had to work through things like language, communication styles, trust-building, and agreeing on how we're going to work together effectively. But once we got past those initial hurdles, the transparency just kind of fell into place seamlessly.

Lenka:

Are there any areas where you feel there is a lack of clarity?

Radoslav:

Well, you know, in our team, we generally do a pretty good job of keeping things clear and everyone informed. But, like in any group, there have been a few instances where I didn't receive all the information about a project. It made me wonder why it didn't come up during our team meetings or why I didn't hear about it from our boss. But here's the thing, I've also kind of taken it upon myself to make sure I stay in the loop when it comes to information flow. It's a two-way street, after all. If something's not crystal clear, I don't hesitate to ask questions or bring it up with my colleagues. Like I mentioned earlier, we always have the time and place to discuss everything, so clarity usually finds its way into the picture eventually. It's all part of the collaborative spirit.

Lenka:

How well do team members understand each other's perspectives, strengths, and weaknesses?

Radoslav:

Well, you know, I can't say I have a complete grasp on that. Speaking for myself, I don't really spend a lot of time pondering over other people's opinions or their work situations, and I'm not actively trying to delve into their perspectives. My expectation is pretty straightforward - if someone has an opinion or viewpoint, they express it, and it's up to them to clarify and help others understand where they're coming from. I don't assume that people will automatically get what I'm thinking; I prefer to proactively explain myself as clearly as possible, laying out all the necessary info to back up my point. And, of course, if I don't understand what someone else is saying, I'm not shy about asking questions, and I expect the same in return. You know, in a team, it's not always easy to navigate the complex web of individual perspectives and strengths. We all come from different backgrounds and experiences, and it's natural that we won't always see eye to eye. But that's where proper communication comes in. I've found that when team members are willing to express themselves clearly and without reservation, it becomes much easier to grasp each other's viewpoints. I think it's essential for everyone on the team to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns. That way, we can bridge any gaps in understanding and leverage each other's strengths more effectively. It's like putting together a puzzle; when everyone's piece fits, the bigger picture becomes much clearer. And while our leader certainly plays a role in fostering this kind of open environment, it's a collective effort among all of us to actively seek to understand each other better.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in fostering understanding among team members?

Radoslav:

Well, I do have high expectations for our leader in terms of guiding the team through discussions, especially when we're diving into topics that might not be familiar to everyone. You see, it's not always smooth sailing when we venture into uncharted territory, and that's where I believe our leader can step in to provide some valuable navigation. In my opinion, our leader could put more emphasis on this aspect. It's not about spoon-feeding information. However, I also understand that we can't rely solely on our leader to make everything crystal

clear. It's a team effort, after all, and we all play a role in making sure we understand each other as we work towards our goals. Our leader can set the tone and provide guidance, but it's up to us to actively participate in the process of understanding each other's perspectives and strengthening our teamwork.

Lenka:

How open and transparent is the communication within your team? Do team members feel comfortable expressing their opinions, ideas, and concerns openly?

Radoslav:

I think I already expressed that in all of previous answers that I believe it's one of the cornerstones of our team. Our team places a high value on open and transparent communication. We encourage team members to express their opinions, share ideas, and voice concerns openly. It's not just about feeling comfortable; it's about fostering an environment where everyone's input is genuinely welcomed and appreciated. In our team, we've found that communicating in our native languages, especially Czech and Slovak, enhances this comfort and transparency. It's easier for us to express ourselves fully and clearly when we use our native languages, and it also helps build a stronger sense of camaraderie. I think this is also the question of who you are talking to. Open communication is not a problem within our team in general, but there are individuals that can make this a little bit challenging. For example, in some cases my questions were answered by counter questions in a manner that made me feel like it was wrong that I had a question, or that my questions were on a level so basic, I should know the answer for 100%. Or maybe my ideas or proposals for changes, when presented, were attacked in a similar way and I felt guilty for wrongdoing. But I have to mention this was doing of one particular older colleague and it might have been a result of non seeing eye to eye with him. In the end I think it didn't have that big of an impact, because we always managed to find answers or feedback asking other people. Maybe I would have like if this was addressed more firmly from the leader's perspective.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in promoting open communication within the team?

Radoslav:

Our leader plays a vital role in promoting open communication. Firstly, her ability to speak Slovak, is a significant advantage. Even though it is not my first language, I speak Czech, I appreciated the effort and understand Slovak very well. It makes it even more convenient for team members to express themselves without language barriers. She actively encourages us to share our thoughts, ideas, and concerns during meetings and one-on-one discussions. Furthermore, she sets the example by being approachable and open to feedback herself. When team members see our leader valuing open communication, it sets the tone for the entire team. Overall, I believe her leadership style strongly contributes to the open and transparent communication we enjoy within our team.

Lenka:

Are there any language or fluency gaps within your team that impact communication and understanding?

Radoslav:

You know, every now and then, we hit a bump in the road when someone uses a term or expression that doesn't quite land with everyone due to language differences. It happens, but honestly, it's not a big deal. When these moments pop up, we have a simple fix – we switch to using the English, which usually clears things right up. It's like our own little language hack, and it keeps our communication on track without any major hiccups. I wouldn't say my English is perfect, I prefer to speak Czech, but I know enough to clear any misunderstandings.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in addressing language or fluency gaps within the team?

Radoslav:

Our leader is pretty chill about these occasional language bumps. She doesn't make a big fuss, and neither do we. We've got this unspoken agreement to switch to English or clarify stuff when needed. Our leader's approach is spot on – she keeps us focused on the task at hand, not the language quirks. It's part of what makes our team work so well together, and we all appreciate her for it.

Lenka:

How would you describe the overall culture within your company, and how does it impact your team?

Radoslav:

Well, you know, our company is kinda shifting towards flat hierarchy. It's not fully there yet, but hey, we're trying. One big change was when we ditched the cubicles for an open office setup – that really got the ball rolling. Personally, I'm all for it. But for now, I'm pretty pleased with how our team is shaping up. Our leader is doing her thing, stressing that we're all on the same level, no matter our job titles. Though, gotta admit, some people tend to be a tad reserved when it comes to speaking their minds or dishing out criticism. That's where our leader's got her mojo working – she's all about getting us to speak up, share our two cents, and not hold back. We're a work in progress.

Lenka:

Are there any cultural aspects that influence team dynamics or communication?

Radoslav:

People in Slovakia tend to be a bit reserved when it comes to giving direct and strong feedback. It's not necessarily a bad thing, but it can slow down the process of improvement. Our leader recognizes this cultural aspect because Poland is not so different so she knows these norms more or less and is actively working to create an environment where we feel comfortable sharing our opinions openly and constructively. It's a balance we're striving for, aligning our cultural tendencies with the need for open communication and growth.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in managing and aligning team dynamics with the company culture?

Radoslav:

I'd say Agata is a key player in connecting the dots between our team's vibe and the shifting company culture. She's putting in the hours to drive home the idea that every one of us should pitch in, no matter our titles. It's no walk in the park, especially if folks around here aren't always quick to speak their minds. But bit by bit, her hard work is making a difference,

and we're heading toward a more open and team-oriented atmosphere. She's pretty much the one who links up our team's tried-and-true dynamics with the culture our company's gunning for.

Lenka:

How would you describe your leader's leadership style and its impact on your team?

Radoslav:

First of all, I have to say that our leader brings a strong feeling of belonging to our team. I guess it's thanks to open communication and that we have dedicated time for non-business-related topics. I think this really helps team members get to know each other, understand each other, and manage our expectations regarding others based on more accurate knowledge. I think she has very important role. Because even as a team we have a very great professional relationship with her, at least speaking for myself. But I am confident others feel the same way. So even though we have good relations with her, at the end of the day, she is the one that has to approve decisions, she has the main say in the team's strategy, and also she is the one who sustains consistency in team building activities. In other words, she is actively working towards building some sort of team identity, or team spirit would be better phrasing. And yes, it is also a matter of team members, you have to be willing to change and open to new things and literally destroy old habits. That can be hard and I was not always happy with everything, but when I took a step back and viewed the certain changes within the long term strategy it made sense to me. But there were times I had, or other colleagues have opposed some ideas or plans. In those cases I think we all felt like our opinions were heard and the implementations of changes were adjusted.

Lenka:

Are there any specific leadership behaviours or approaches that you find effective or ineffective in your team?

Radoslav:

I also think that our leader helps us manage our self-expectations. We're often assured that we don't have to spend unreasonable overtime on tasks, that we can always ask for advice, and we can always count on help from our team. Personally, I really appreciate team dinners,

nights out, or out-of-work activities that our leader encourages us to do and often participates in. It helps me overcome obstacles in communication and build straight communication with my colleagues. However, since we switched to full remote setup we don't have them as often as we used to.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in shaping the team's effectiveness through their leadership style?

Radoslav:

I believe our leader plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of unity within the team and helps us strike a balance in our workload and expectations. Her leadership style encourages camaraderie and open communication, which, in my opinion, is very effective in our team. It might not be a one-size-fits-all approach, but it works well for the majority of us. I know there is at least one person in our team who would appreciate more direct and strict leadership. But again, it's a matter of preference from my perspective.

Lenka:

How do you perceive the impact of cultural differences (e.g., nationality, ethnicity, background) among team members and your leader on team effectiveness?

Radoslav:

Well, you know, as someone who has spent many years abroad while studying and later also working and living, and comes from a culturally diverse background, I've learned not to judge based on nationalities. I tend to focus more on personal discipline and work habits. So, I haven't really observed any significant differences in terms of nationality impacting our team's efficiency.

Radoslav:

I'd say cultural differences come into play more in casual conversations, like when we're discussing our personal lives and daily activities. But when it comes to our work and professional interactions, I haven't noticed any major issues related to cultural differences.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in managing and leveraging cultural diversity within the team?

Radoslav:

To be honest, I don't think our leader has to manage cultural diversity within the team extensively. Our team seems to have a good mix of backgrounds, but it hasn't caused any significant challenges that would require special management. We all work well together, regardless of our cultural backgrounds.

Lenka:

Do you think there is something we did not talk about when discussing your team and team leader?

Radoslav:

No, I think I said everything important.

Lenka:

Then I thank you for your willingness to participate and your time.

Radoslav:

Gladly.

12.5 Interview n.5 (Lucia; 22y/o, Czechia)

Lenka:

Hello, thank you for taking the time to talk to me. First of all, I want to say that everything you say today during this interview is confidential. And my first question would be, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your position in the team?

Lucia:

Hi, thank you for having me. My name is Lucia, and I joined the team in the year 2020, which was actually quite a weird year due to the COVID situation. At the time I joined, around July, it was a mixed situation, with some offices still open, and some people still going to the

office in this company I work for, while others were not. I did not have previous experience with working from home, so for me, it felt quite unusual.

Lenka:

Thank you for sharing that. We'll get to that a little bit later. First of all, let's start with trust. So trust, in this case, will be some kind of umbrella term. And my first question is, how would you rate the level of trust within your team?

Lucia:

You know, this job was a big deal for me because it was my very first one, and it wasn't even full-time – I was working as an intern, helping out the team where I could. Now, the thing was, most of the folks in the team were quite a bit older than me. So, naturally, when I joined, I had this feeling like I was the new kid on the block, and I was honestly a little worried they might not really accept me into their tight-knit group. But you know what? It turned out to be quite the opposite. The team, they really went the extra mile to make me feel like I belonged. They were incredibly supportive right from the start. And as time went on, they began to see that I could actually contribute, that I could be a helpful member of the team. It was a bit like finding my footing in a new place, and I'm grateful that they gave me the chance to prove myself. So, fast forward to now, I'd say I trust every single one of my teammates, and you know what? I think they trust me too. It's like we've all got each other's backs, and that trust we've built, it makes us a pretty strong team.

Lenka:

Can you provide specific examples or instances where trust has been built or eroded within your team?

Lucia:

Well, I haven't had any unwelcome experiences within our team. Once or twice, there were discussions about some team members' involvement, particularly when we switched to 100% working from home. Let's put it this way...he was treating homeoffice more like a day off rather than work. But these issues were resolved through discussion. I did face a situation during my first week when I sought information from someone outside our team via email, and it was forwarded to an executive in our company. It seemed like this person wanted to

undermine me somehow, but our team leader stood up for me, supported me, and guided me through it. So, at the end of it all, I felt quite supported because of the reactions from my team and team member. It wasn't pleasant, but the not so nice experience was not coming from the team or the leader.

Lenka:

I appreciate your openness in sharing your experiences. Let's dive into the topic of technology. How do you feel about the effectiveness of the technology and communication tools your team uses for work?

Lucia:

Well, when it comes to the tech side of things, it's been quite alright and suits our needs. I've got a good handle on which tool to use for what situation. If I need a quick chat, I hop on Teams, but if something's a bit more important or can wait a bit, then I'll shoot an email. So, yeah, it's working smoothly, and I'm comfortable with the technology we use.

Lenka:

That sounds great. Now, about limitations – you mentioned different platforms. Are there any challenges that come with using multiple platforms?

Lucia:

Absolutely, especially when we made the switch to full-time remote work. It was a bit tricky, especially for some of the older colleagues who weren't used to these tools. But honestly, I saw it as a chance to lend a hand and get to know my colleagues better. Being the youngest one, I figured I could help them adapt. Now, about the limitations, well, we did have some funny moments, you know, like those times when you'd ask, "Can you hear me? Can you see me?" We always joked, it sounds like we were doing a seance. But in the end, we all figured out these tools together. Sure, people sometimes complain about online tools not being very reliable, with bad connections and all. But honestly, stuff can go wrong even when you're meeting in person, like your car breaking down or tripping and hurting yourself. So, in my book, it's all good.

Lenka:

Thanks for sharing that perspective. Moving on, let's talk about clarity. How well do you understand your team's goals, expectations, and roles?

Lucia:

I've got to say, I really appreciate how clear our team lead, Agata, is about our goals and expectations. Personally, I'm a structured person, and I thrive on clear guidance. Agata lays it out pretty well, but at the same time, she lets us breathe and find our own ways to tackle tasks. It's like she's there when we need her, you know? Especially since this was my first job, I was pretty unsure at the beginning. But she gave me room to learn on my own and was always there when I needed guidance. Thoughtful and patient, I'd say.

Lenka:

That's great to hear. Now, when it comes to understanding your team members' perspectives and weaknesses, how do you approach that?

Lucia:

Well, in a team of around 20 people, it's tough to claim I understand everyone completely. I know folks to some extent, but there are naturally smaller groups where people really click and support each other. On a broader level, I try my best to understand everyone. It's something we've encouraged among ourselves. But, honestly, there are usually a few people you naturally gravitate towards and understand better.

Lenka:

Makes sense. Lastly, in the context of remote work, how do you view your leader's role in fostering understanding among team members?

Lucia:

It was quite a shift when we moved from the office to remote work and had those team reshufflings. I'd say Agata played a crucial role in helping us all understand what was going on. Some folks were understandably upset with all the changes, and, well, you know how chaotic things were with COVID. But Agata communicated really well, even setting up time for us to work together online, kind of like we were in the office. It was a nice touch and made a big difference.

Lenka:

We discussed trust and technology and different perspectives. You mentioned here and there the communication, but now I would like to focus more on that. So how open and transparent is the communication within your team?

Lucia:

You know, it did take us a little while to really gel as a team and get to know Agata when I first joined. I mean, it's only natural, right? We were all kind of feeling each other out, and Agata was still settling into her role as well. Those initial days were crucial in making the foundation for our team dynamics. But what's really cool about our team is that we've built this strong sense of trust and openness over time. I never have that fear of sounding silly or being judged when I speak up. It's like, I can throw any question out there, no matter how basic or complicated, and I won't get those sideways glances or raised eyebrows. This kind of environment really encourages everyone to be themselves and contribute in their own way. Sure, there are certain things that Agata can't spill the beans on, like the super-secret, hush-hush stuff that's way above our pay grade. But when it comes to brainstorming new ideas or just hashing out work-related stuff, it's all fair game. We're actively encouraged to pitch in with our ideas, share our insights, and hash out strategies together. This openness in communication, it's not just talk; it's something we practice daily. It makes us all feel like we're part of something bigger, like our ideas genuinely matter. And I've got to hand it to Agata – she's been a rock in creating an atmosphere where everyone's voice counts, where there's mutual respect and trust. It's what keeps our team ticking and pushing forward.

Lenka:

How do you perceive your leader's role in fostering understanding among team members since you are working from home?

Lucia:

Oh, absolutely, that period when our team was navigating the shift from the office to remote work and the whole team restructuring was quite a rollercoaster. It was quite an interesting shift for me because I started when they were transitioning from working in the office to working from home and also restructuring teams. I mean, you can imagine, right? It was like stepping into a whirlwind of change. Now, Agata, she was a pivotal figure during this transformation. I can't emphasize enough how crucial her role was. With everything going on,

some of our team members were understandably upset because change can be tough, especially with the added upheaval of the COVID situation. What I really admire about Agata is her communication skills. She really had a knack for keeping everyone in the loop. There were times when she would carve out specific slots for us to work together online. It wasn't just about the work; it was about creating that sense of togetherness. You know, those virtual meetings didn't just feel like another video call; they made us feel like we were back in the office, working side by side. It might sound simple, but those small efforts she put in really mattered. They reassured us during uncertain times, and they showcased her leadership. It's one thing to talk about supporting your team, but she showed it in her actions. It was like, "Hey, we're all in this together, and I've got your back." Honestly, that kind of leadership and empathy goes a long way in building team morale, especially when we're all navigating uncharted waters. It's like having a steady hand on the ship when the waves are choppy, and it's something I truly appreciate about Agata's approach as our leader.

Lenka:

How would you describe the overall culture within your company, and how does it impact your team?

Lucia:

I don't think I'm in touch with the company culture so much, to be honest. I believe that the shift to 100% remote work changed the culture quite a bit. From the communication I receive from the company management, it seems like they are trying to move toward a flatter hierarchy and more openness, which was not the case before I joined, or at least that's what I've heard.

Lenka:

Are there any cultural aspects that influence team dynamics or communication?

Lucia:

As I said before, the difference between Czech and Slovak culture is not very significant, so I don't see any major cultural aspects influencing our team's work. I would say it brings us together because we are from different countries, but we can still understand each other's cultural references and jokes, which is quite nice.

Lenka:

How would you describe your leader's leadership style and its impact on your team?

Lucia:

Agata promotes open discussion, tries not to micromanage, and emphasizes a flat hierarchy. Sometimes the micromanagement part varies; perhaps it's because I was inexperienced when I joined, and she thought I needed more support. There were times when it was frustrating, but once I communicated my concerns, she did her best to address them. It all comes down to proper communication, not only from her side but also from ours when something is bothering us.

Lenka:

Are there any specific instances or examples where cultural differences have influenced team dynamics or communication within the team?

Lucia:

Well, you know, when it comes to communication in our team, there haven't been any major hiccups or roadblocks that I can recall. Of course, like any group with diverse backgrounds, we've had our moments, but they've been more like minor speed bumps than anything else. Maybe in the early days, there were a few instances where we stumbled upon words or phrases in each other's languages that we didn't quite grasp. You could say it was all part of the learning curve as we got used to one another's languages and cultures. It's funny how language can be both a bridge and a hurdle, right? But these little language slip-ups, they never really snowballed into significant problems. I'd say the initial phase was a bit more challenging, primarily because we were all still figuring out our common vocabulary. But fast forward to today, and it's like a well-oiled machine. Communication flows smoothly, and those early language hurdles have pretty much disappeared. In a way, these minor language moments have become a source of camaraderie within our team. We can look back and have a good laugh about those times when we were trying to explain words or phrases to each other. It's all part of the journey of working together, and it's helped us bond and grow as a team.

Lenka:

Is there anything you think we did not discuss in the matter of your team, you believe is important?

Lucia:

I think we covered everything.

Lenka:

Ok, once again thank you for your time, it is much appreciated and have a nice rest of the day.

Lucia:

Thank you, it was very interesting opportunity to talk about my team in this setup.

12.6 Interview n.6 (Agata; 41y/o, Poland, team leader)

Lenka:

Thank you a lot for finding time to talk about your team and how you operate and what is your experience with leading dispersed team. I will be asking about 9 different elements of collaboration and team management. Please note the conversation will be recorded, but strictly confidential. Firstly, let's talk about trust. How do you establish and maintain trust within your team?

Agata:

Building trust for me is all about showing up for my team, both during the good times and the challenging moments. I make sure to listen attentively to their concerns and offer my support whenever needed. Honesty is a core value, and I always stand by my word, never resorting to dishonesty. If there are limitations due to confidentiality, I communicate openly that certain information cannot be shared at the moment. It's important for my team to feel that they can rely on me and understand that making mistakes is part of the learning process.

Lenka:

How do you ensure that trust is maintained over time?

Agata:

Maintaining trust over time is crucial in building strong relationships with my team members. I believe trust is built through consistent actions and open communication. To ensure trust is maintained, I make it a point to be there for my team members, both in good times and challenging moments. By offering support and actively listening to their concerns, I demonstrate that I genuinely care about their well-being and success. This consistent support helps foster a sense of trust and reliability. As I said before honesty and transparency is very important to me and I strive to be transparent and honest in all my interactions with the team. I communicate openly, sharing relevant information and updates with my team. If there are any constraints due to confidentiality, I clearly express the limitations and reasons behind them. By being truthful and upfront, I ensure that trust is maintained and team members feel valued and informed. I understand the importance of consistency in building trust. I follow through on my commitments and promises, always standing by my word. By being reliable and consistent in my actions, I demonstrate that I can be trusted over time. This consistency helps establish a strong foundation of trust within the team. Trust can also be strengthened when we acknowledge and learn from our mistakes. I believe in creating a safe environment where team members are allowed to make honest mistakes as part of the learning process. When errors occur, I encourage open discussions to understand what went wrong and how we can improve. By taking accountability and demonstrating a willingness to learn and grow, I show my team that trust is not easily shaken and that we can overcome challenges together. I maintain open lines of communication with my team members on a regular basis. Through weekly one-on-one meetings and team meetings, I provide a platform for open discussions, feedback, and sharing of ideas. This allows for ongoing dialogue, ensuring that trust is nurtured and concerns are addressed promptly. Overall, trust is maintained over time by consistently demonstrating support, transparency, reliability, learning from mistakes, and fostering open communication. These practices contribute to a positive and trusting environment where team members feel valued and confident in their relationship with me as their leader.

Lenka:

Thank you second element is your leadership style. How would you describe your leadership style?

Agata:

I aim for a collaborative style, with a lot of open and honest communication, focusing on the growth mindset - of me and my team. Which means setting clear expectations while allowing space to the employee to do the task on their own. This is something I continuously work on for myself - instead of offering an idea for a solution, even if I have one and the colleague is not asking for it, provide rather a more general, strategic guidance and keep the advice or idea only when the person comes to me that they need it. Or when I see that they are struggling with finding a way.

Lenka:

Are there any specific aspects of your leadership style that you consciously work on to positively impact the team and its performance?

Agata:

Yes, as a leader, I am always trying to improve my style so that it has a good effect on the team and how well it does. There are a few things that I work on intentionally, such as collaborative approach. I think it's important to make sure that everyone's ideas and contributions are recognized at work. I try to get everyone on the team to talk to each other openly and honestly, making it a safe place for ideas to be shared and talked about. By encouraging a collaborative approach, I hope to use my team members' different skills and points of view to come up with more creative ideas and improve our team's performance. Secondly, it is important to have a growth mindset, and always be willing to learn. I have a growth mentality, and I try to get my team to do the same. I think that learning and growing all the time is important for both personal and professional improvement. I help and give my team members chances to improve their skills and knowledge by giving them training, workshops, and coaching. By encouraging a growth mindset, I hope to encourage and inspire the people on my team to keep getting better and strive for greatness. Next, I know how important it is to give my team members the freedom to take responsibility for their job and make decisions. I give them jobs and set clear expectations, so they can work on their own and be responsible. I urge them to come up with their own ideas and plans, and when they need it, I give them advice and help. Giving people more freedom gives them a sense of ownership and duty, which makes them more motivated and productive. Also I believe in effective feedback and recognition. I know how important it is to give my team members prompt and helpful feedback. I try to give them regular feedback on how they're doing, pointing out their strengths and places where they

could improve. I also think it's important to recognize and celebrate their accomplishments and milestones. I want to create a positive and supportive work environment that supports continuous growth and high performance by giving good feedback and praise. In today's fast-paced workplace, it's important to be able to react and change. I work hard to change with the times and be open to new ideas and ways of doing things. I know that each team member has different needs and wants, and I try to meet as many of them as possible. By being flexible in how I lead, I hope to create a welcoming, helpful setting that encourages teamwork and cooperation. By paying attention to these parts of my leadership style, I hope to have a positive effect on the team and its performance, creating an atmosphere of trust, growth, and great achievement.

Lenka:

You already mentioned here and there following element, but I want to focus more on it specifically and it is open communication. How do you promote open communication within the team?

Agata:

In this case it is all about leading by example for me. As mentioned before, I always tell the truth and keep my word - and expect the same from my team, which I also openly communicate. Before the pandemic we met at least weekly in person for a team meeting, on top of other, project related meetings. With the start of the pandemic, this was moved to a virtual space - we use Webex for larger meetings (always with camera on, that is important to keep the feeling of being in the meeting and being a team), for one on one meetings and chatting we use Teams. Moreover, I keep a slot in my calendar that is substituting physical 'Open door' hour, when all my team members have a link to join and can join when they wish to, whether to speak about specific issues, catch up in general or any other reason.

Lenka:

What about language and fluency gap? I understand your native language is Polish, however you are leading slovak/czech team. How do you manage language or fluency gaps among team members and yourself as well?

Agata:

This was a tricky issue, with me being from Poland and my team being from two different countries. Fortunately, Czech and Slovak are so close that there are no language gaps between my team members, which makes things much easier. The problem was for me to understand them - and their reports - in the local languages. Of course my direct reports speak English and more than half of our meetings are still in English, but to get truly close to the people I knew I had to speak the local language. Having started in Slovakia, I also started learning Slovak, with a teacher, and practicing daily by requesting my team members to speak Slovak with me. Having more or less fluent knowledge of the language now allows me to switch to Slovak in case any team member feels uncomfortable speaking English. Speaking the local language is a very helpful and valuable in a role such as mine. In order to understand my team on another level, otherwise you won't be able to tackle all the issues and will be kept in the know only for topics English speakers want to share with you.

Lenka:

The fifth element I would like to talk about more in details is understanding. How do you ensure that team members have a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and tasks?

Agata:

Understanding goes hand in hand with effective communication, so this is ensured by weekly one on one meetings with all my reports and weekly meetings within the team. Project meetings we also close with reiteration of what was agreed and who needs to do what in what time horizon. In addition to individual meetings, I organize regular team meetings to discuss overall project goals, objectives, and the collective responsibilities of the team. This allows for alignment and clarity among team members, ensuring everyone understands how their individual contributions fit into the bigger picture. To further reinforce understanding, I provide written documentation such as project briefs, task lists, and guidelines. These documents outline the scope of work, expectations, and any specific instructions or guidelines to follow. This written material serves as a point of reference, reducing ambiguity and promoting consistency in the team's work. Furthermore, I encourage open dialogue and encourage team members to share their insights and perspectives on their roles and tasks. This fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment, as team members have the opportunity to contribute their ideas and suggestions. Regular check-ins and feedback sessions allow us to address any gaps in

understanding and make necessary adjustments. I also promote a collaborative environment where team members can rely on each other for support and clarification. By fostering a culture of knowledge sharing and teamwork, individuals can learn from one another, ask questions, and provide guidance when needed. Finally, I recognize the importance of ongoing professional development. I support team members in their growth by offering training opportunities, workshops, and resources relevant to their roles. This ensures that they have the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their tasks effectively. In summary, I ensure that team members have a clear understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and tasks through open and transparent communication, individual and team meetings, written documentation, fostering collaboration, and promoting ongoing professional development. These measures help create a cohesive and well-informed team that can work together efficiently towards achieving our objectives.

Lenka:

Coming up next is clarity. How do you provide clarity in terms of team goals, expectations, and performance feedback?

Agata:

I prefer goal setting to be a bottom up approach instead of me giving targets to my reports as I see fit. It empowers the team to set their own priorities - as a team and as individuals - which we then consult together and I provide feedback or eventually small adjustments so that the goals line up with my and company's goals and strategy. We review the goals halfway through the year in the same manner. Plus as we discussed before it is closely connected with all of those previous elements, such as clear communication, often 121 exchange etc.

Lenka:

What about Technological Support? How do you leverage technology to support team effectiveness?

Agata:

In our company we have a set of standard tools available - mostly Microsoft based (Teams, Sharepoint, Office toolbox), plus before mentioned Webex for effective virtual and hybrid collaboration. Very important here is to provide proper training and showcasing of

different tools and their features, so a training or tutorial is something I require for any new tool. And again, I aim to lead by example, so I use the tools I want my people to use for all kinds of communication. On top of that, I post blogs on our intranet, with information that may be relevant and interesting for all employees. These are naturally always in the local language, not English.

Lenka:

We have mentioned language and different nationalities within your team. How do you manage and leverage cultural differences among team members to enhance team effectiveness?

Agata:

By allocating tasks based on the skillset of each of my team members and when situation allows, teaming them up to get a holistic view on the problem at hand. We also frequently discuss problems and projects in the team meetings, with anyone able to pitch in with their point of view, educational and professional background as well as cultural one. Having a team located in two countries, we also do occasional few days of work from the other location, to allow the people to see and work in conditions the other half of our team is facing daily. Hybrid model of work in general increased the possibilities for inclusion of various needs, for example flexible working hours. In this case, we have on a team level established calendar where everyone marks their availability, whether they are physically present or can connect virtually, which is working very well so far.

Lenka:

How do you consider the unique characteristics of the company, such as its values, mission, and culture, in your leadership approach?

Agata:

My company's values and supported leadership style very closely relate to my own, which is beyond important for me. This makes reflecting the company's values in my leadership rather easy. However, without my previous and current bosses and the company culture that allows honest failure, values openness and honesty and supports brave and innovative ideas, this would not be that easy. I strive to inspire also my team members, who are or will be in leadership positions, to adopt these values as their own as well.

Lenka: What would you consider the biggest challenges of leading the dispersed cross-cultural team?

Agata:

Firstly, one of the most significant challenge is fostering effective communication within the team. Given our team's diverse backgrounds and locations, ensuring that everyone is on the same page and understands each other's perspectives can be quite challenging. Misunderstandings can arise due to language barriers, cultural differences, and varying communication styles. To mitigate this, I've placed a strong emphasis on transparent and open communication. Another big challenge with dispersed teams, and especially teams coming from slightly different cultural background, is least for me creating trust in working environment And recreating the opportunities for improvised collaboration and just basically grabbing the person and discussing what you have been talking about or brainstorming together. Hmmm another challenge I've observed is the varying productivity levels among team members from different cultural backgrounds. Some team members may prefer a fast-paced work environment, while others may have a more relaxed approach. This can sometimes lead to differences in how tasks are prioritized and completed, potentially affecting overall team efficiency.

Lenka:

Thank you a lot for your time it was very helpful, have a nice day!

13.Codebook

Code	Definition
Cultural Differences	Differences in the values, norms, and behaviors between their organization's culture and other cultures within a dispersed team context
Aligning with Company Culture	This code is used when interviewees share insights about their efforts or experiences in adapting their work style, behaviors, or values to align with their organization's culture.
Impact of Company Culture on Remote Work	This code pertains to discussions regarding how an organization's culture influences or affects remote work practices, team dynamics, and overall performance.
Changing Company Culture	This code denotes instances where interviewees discuss initiatives, challenges, or strategies related to efforts aimed at evolving or transforming their organization's culture.
Technology	This code signifies references to various technological tools, platforms, or solutions used for communication, collaboration, or overcoming challenges within dispersed teams.
Use of Communication Tools	This code pertains to discussions related to the practical application, adoption, and effectiveness of communication tools, such as messaging apps, video conferencing, and project management software.
Technology Challenges	This code is used when interviewees describe obstacles, difficulties, or issues encountered while using technology within remote work settings.
Technology as an Enabler	This code signifies instances where technology is discussed as a facilitator or enabler of remote work, improving productivity, communication, or connectivity

Manager's Role in Addressing Tech Issues	This code is applied when interviewees talk about the role of managers or leaders in addressing and resolving technology-related challenges and issues faced by team members.
Leadership Style	This code represents references to the approach or manner in which leaders manage and guide their dispersed teams, encompassing various leadership styles and techniques.
Leader's Leadership Style	This code pertains specifically to discussions about the leadership style adopted by a team leader, providing insights into their leadership philosophy and practice
Collaborative Leadership	This code is used when interviewees describe leadership styles that emphasize collaboration, shared decision-making, and active involvement of team members in the decision-making process
Communication Style of the Leader	This code denotes references to how leaders communicate with their remote teams, encompassing aspects like frequency, clarity, and openness in communication.
Effectiveness of Leadership Style	This code is applied when interviewees assess or comment on the impact or effectiveness of a leader's chosen leadership style on team performance and dynamics.
Cultural Background	This code represents discussions related to cultural backgrounds, including differences, influences, and adaptations within dispersed teams with diverse cultural compositions.
Cultural Differences	This code is used when interviewees discuss disparities and distinctions among team members' cultural backgrounds and how these variances affect team interactions.
Cultural Impact on Communication	This code pertains to conversations about how cultural backgrounds influence communication styles, preferences, and interpretations within dispersed teams
Adapting to Different Cultures	This code is applied when interviewees share their experiences or strategies for adjusting and accommodating diverse cultural backgrounds within their teams.

Role of Leader in Addressing Cultural Diversity	This code signifies discussions regarding the proactive role of leaders in mitigating cultural diversity-related challenges and promoting an inclusive team environment.
Trust	This code encompasses references to trust, encompassing trust in leaders, trust in team members, and discussions about building or eroding trust within dispersed teams.
Trust in Manager	This code is used when interviewees express their levels of trust in their team leader or manager, reflecting their confidence in their leadership.
Trust in Team Members	This code represents instances where interviewees discuss their trust in their fellow team members, reflecting their reliance on the abilities and reliability of their colleagues.
Building Trust	This code pertains to discussions regarding strategies, practices, or experiences related to the establishment and reinforcement of trust within dispersed teams.
Trust Erosion	This code is applied when interviewees discuss factors or experiences that lead to the deterioration or weakening of trust within their team.
Open Communication	This code signifies discussions regarding transparent, open, and honest communication practices within dispersed teams.
Transparency in Communication	This code represents instances where interviewees highlight the importance of transparent communication and its positive impact on team dynamics.
Encouraging Open Dialogue	This code is used when interviewees describe efforts or experiences in fostering an environment where team members feel encouraged and comfortable engaging in open dialogue.
Handling Controversial Topics	This code pertains to discussions about approaches, challenges, or strategies for addressing controversial or sensitive topics within dispersed teams.

Openness in Team Communication	This code is applied when interviewees emphasize the value of openness in team communication, including sharing ideas, concerns, and feedback without fear of retribution.
Language Barriers	This code is used when interviewees discuss obstacles or difficulties arising from differences in languages spoken within their dispersed teams.
Communication Challenges Due to Fluency Gaps	This code signifies instances where interviewees describe communication challenges stemming from varying levels of language fluency among team members.
Bridging Language Gaps	This code pertains to discussions about strategies, practices, or experiences in bridging language gaps and facilitating effective communication within diverse linguistic teams.
Impact on Teamwork	This code represents conversations regarding how language and fluency gaps impact teamwork, collaboration, and overall team performance.
Understanding	This code encompasses discussions related to understanding strengths and weaknesses, as well as the role of leaders in promoting mutual understanding among team members.
Understanding Strengths and Weaknesses	This code is used when interviewees discuss their perceptions of team members' strengths and weaknesses, reflecting their awareness of individual capabilities
Leader's Role in Promoting Understanding	This code signifies conversations regarding the proactive role of leaders in facilitating mutual understanding, constructive feedback, and effective utilization of team members' strengths.
Understanding Team Members' Perspectives	This code pertains to discussions about the importance of understanding and considering the diverse perspectives and viewpoints of team members within dispersed team
Clarity	This code represents references to the clarity of goals, expectations, roles, and communication within dispersed

	teams, emphasizing the need for clear and unambiguous guidelines
Clarity of Goals and Expectations	This code is used when interviewees discuss the importance of clearly defined goals and expectations, ensuring that team members understand their roles and responsibilities.
Role Clarity	This code pertains to discussions about the need for team members to have a clear understanding of their roles and the roles of their colleagues to facilitate effective collaboration.
Communication of Expectations	This code signifies conversations regarding the communication of expectations, including instructions, objectives, and requirements within dispersed teams.
Role of Leader in Providing Clarity	This code represents discussions about the proactive role of leaders in ensuring role clarity, goal alignment, and effective communication of expectations within their teams
Teamwork Challenges	This code encompasses discussions about the various challenges and obstacles faced by dispersed teams in their pursuit of effective teamwork and collaboration
Telework	This code is used when interviewees specifically discuss teleworking challenges, practices, or preferences, which are relevant to remote work arrangements.

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