

Virtual and hybrid teams with shared values perform better

When teams go virtual, clear ground rules and shared cultural values can be strong indicators of success.



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- **Virtual and hybrid teams require different management skills and clear codes of conduct to improve performance.**

- **Cultural differences, even within countries, can affect how team members interact and follow the unwritten norms.**
- **A collectivist mindset and a wish to avoid ambiguity can promote shared codes of conduct and better outcomes.**

Team dynamics are always tricky, and the post-pandemic landscape of virtual and hybrid teams calls for new management tools.

Research by IESE's [Isabel Villamor](#), with [N. Sharon Hill](#) of George Washington University, suggests that managers need to be aware of cultural differences between team members and how these [affect communication and cohesion](#). Where cultural traits that signal team cohesion are absent, managers may need to do the extra work of promoting shared behavioral expectations.

Specifically, the authors look at how two cultural traits affect team cohesion, and what this means for virtual work.

Cultural differences in virtual teams

Cultural clashes in global teams are a much-discussed phenomenon. But a team doesn't need to be international for these differences to stack up — within countries there are different backgrounds, different beliefs and different understandings of what is right and wrong.

Hill and Villamor draw on two aspects of cultural values that can be decisive to how effectively a team functions:

- **Uncertainty avoidance:** This rates how threatened a person feels by uncertain or ambiguous situations. For example, someone who is uncertainty avoidant would likely opt for a fixed-term mortgage over variable.
- **Collectivism:** This is the degree to which a person feels interdependent with those around them. In collectivist cultures, people tend to view themselves as contributing to a larger whole, in contrast to individualistic cultures.

The authors looked at self-managed teams and assigned them a mean rating for collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, and then looked to see how this rating affected results further down the line.

Values, norms of conduct and team performance in virtual teams

Teams work best when all members adhere to some basic ground rules in terms of the results they want and legitimate ways to pursue them. These shared standards can promote consistency and predictability in behavior, eventually affecting work outcomes. These ground rules might include a meeting once a week or answering emails within 24 hours. Often the rules are explicit to begin with, but gradually morph into “just how our team works.” They are known as norms of conduct — the extent to which a team has clear standards for desirable behavior that are shared among its members.

Returning to the team functions of uncertainty avoidance and collectivism, both are strong indicators that team members will adhere to norms of conduct. It’s logical: a collectivist mindset is predicated on the importance of the collective, and norms provide a framework to hold back uncertainty.

The structure and certainty that these norms of conduct provide are particularly important for highly virtual teams. Whereas in-person teams can hash out misunderstandings over coffee, hybrid teams benefit from a strong shared framework to prevent those misunderstandings from occurring in the first place.

The teams that shared the cultural values of collectivism and uncertainty avoidance tended to be more cohesive, and this, in turn, had positive results on team performance, though there are some addendums. Namely, cohesive teams performed better, but only when the knowledge of their task was high. A strongly cohesive team environment is no substitute for being clear on the job to be done.

No I in team

In the office, misunderstandings can arise, but face-to-face bonding can help resolve them. When these personal interactions are removed, establishing basic ground rules — which might arise naturally or need to be built up by managers — can keep teams working well.

For modern managers faced with hybrid teams, it pays to be aware of the cultural differences that members bring to the table, even if all are from the same country or region. A collectivist mindset and a wish to avoid ambiguity can promote shared codes of conduct and better outcomes. Where teams are more individualistic, these codes of conduct may need to be more vigilantly built and reinforced.

Methodology, briefly

209 students were divided into 49 teams for a project requiring a high level of team coordination in a hybrid work environment. Assessments of student attitudes toward collectivism and uncertainty avoidance were made prior to the task, and their team's norms of conduct and level of cohesion were measured against performance toward the end of the task.

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