



## Leading global teams<sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Global teams  
Virtual teams  
Multicultural teams  
Team leadership  
People-oriented leadership  
Boundary spanner  
Bridge maker  
Biculturalism  
Leverage diversity

### ABSTRACT

Global teams that are characterized by national, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity and operate in a globally dispersed virtual environment are becoming an established form of organizing work in multinational organizations. As global team leadership research is rather limited, we review the literature on leading multicultural and virtual teams in a global context, focusing on leadership competencies, styles, strategies and modes. We also examine the emergent concepts of biculturalism, global mindset and cultural intelligence with respect to team leaders. Our aim is to add to our knowledge of leading global teams, highlight recent trends and suggest directions for future research. Three themes for global team leadership emerged: leaders as boundary spanners, bridge makers and blenders; people-oriented leadership; and leveraging diversity. We discuss implications for research and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

As organizations become more diverse and ever new forms of organizing emerge, working in global teams is fast becoming the rule rather than the exception. Multinational teams of all shapes and sizes have been called the 'heart' of globalization (Snow, Snell, Canney Davision, & Hambrick, 1996) and are routinely used to cope with our increasingly competitive, complex and culturally diverse 21st century world (DiStefano & Maznevski, 2000; Ravlin, Thomas, & Ilsev, 2000). In the midst of technological advances of the last decade, global virtual teams, defined as nationally, geographically, and culturally diverse groups that communicate almost exclusively through electronic media (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), rose to the fore of organizational innovations (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). Team members work across temporal and spatial boundaries, most often in the absence of face-to-face interaction, to coordinate their activities toward the attainment of common goals from different locations around the globe. Global virtual teams and collocated teams came to be viewed as end poles on a continuum with most global teams ending up somewhere in between based on their degree of face-to-face interaction

(Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004). Yet, it seems that these new organizational forms are surfacing more quickly than scholars are able to study them; research on global and virtual team leadership, in particular, is lagging behind (Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007; Zigurs, 2002). It is our overall objective to increase the knowledge about leading global teams.

Global teams, as defined by Maloney and Zellmer-Bruhn (2006), differ from other teams on the following two characteristics: (1) a globally dispersed work environment, and (2) heterogeneity on multiple dimensions. We have chosen to focus specifically on national cultural heterogeneity, a salient characteristic of global teams, as nationality has been found to override other demographic and tenure-based categorizations in such teams (Butler, 2006; Earley & Mosakowski, 2000) and with respect to leadership (Zander & Romani, 2004). Our knowledge about leading global teams is still limited (Davis & Bryant, 2003; Joshi & Lazarova, 2005), but since teams are multicultural in composition and virtual in action they stand at the crossroads of two literature streams – multicultural team research and virtual team research (Steers, Sanchez-Runde, & Nardon, 2010).

There is growing attention devoted to studying virtual teams, and although progress has been made with respect to comparing collocated and virtual teams, the literature does not to any large extent distinguish between single and multi-country types of virtual teams. Much of the work is still conceptual or purely practitioner oriented. There is a limited number of empirical studies on leading virtual teams in general (Malhotra et al., 2007; Zigurs, 2002), and fewer still that are cross-cultural (Davis & Bryant, 2003; Joshi & Lazarova, 2005). With regard to research on

<sup>☆</sup> The authors wish to thank the JWB Special Issue editors Rick Steers, Carlos Sanchez-Runde, Luciara Nardon for insightful comments, the Editor-in-Chief John Slocum and Jan Olavarri, Assistant to the Editor-in-Chief, for support in what has been a pleasurable writing experience.

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multicultural teams, we find that the accumulation of knowledge on the processes and outcomes of multicultural teams is prolific (Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2010). The literature about leading multicultural teams is less extensive (Zander & Butler, 2010), but it is expanding as is our knowledge about leading virtual teams. We will demonstrate this when we discuss leadership competencies, styles, strategies and modes as well as recent cultural research about the team leader such as biculturalism, global mindsets and cultural intelligence.

In this article, we aim to identify key emerging themes and directions in which global team leadership is heading and provide some suggestions for future research. Our review of the trends will center on the issues that have emerged in recent years. We will first turn to the literature on virtual teams for an understanding of leading in a virtual context, then to the literature on multicultural teams for an insight into multicultural team leadership and finally to recent culture research to add to our knowledge of global team leaders. In contrast to the more common practice of examining leadership from only the leaders' perspective, it is our ambition to incorporate both team leaders' and members' perspectives for a more holistic and complex picture of global team leadership. Our review results in three themes for global team leadership: global leaders as boundary spanners, bridge makers and blenders; people-oriented leadership in global teams; and leveraging global team diversity. We thus ground our ideas for a future research agenda on leading global teams in emerging cutting-edge work before concluding with some reflections and managerial implications.

## 2. Leading virtual teams

The virtual context has enabled teams to complete tasks more efficiently and quickly than ever before, and access the best resources and people in locations around the globe. Not surprisingly, these positive aspects are coupled with challenges. Given the virtual context that global virtual teams (GVTs) work in, members' different cultural backgrounds, the interface of technology, and the fact that members are often not in synch because of different time zones, the role of leading virtual teams is riddled with complexity. Because GVT members often cannot see their leader, one might get the sense that virtual team leaders need to have special knowledge or qualities or display certain types of behaviors to be effective.

In their recent review, Jonsen, Maznevski, and Canney Davison (in press) highlight some of the leader challenges and virtual team aspects that have received attention in the general GVT literature. These are rather straightforward leader actions, such as maintaining communication, establishing relationships and managing conflict. In fact, much of the literature on GVTs highlights the importance of communication and trust (e.g., Aubert & Kelsey, 2003; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Krebs, Hobman, & Bordia, 2006; Zigers, 2002). But this is not as simple as it sounds, because GVT members often rely on team leaders to provide direction and inspiration from a distance. GVT leaders must possess excellent asynchronous communication skills, and must be especially effective in synchronous and face-to-face communication since there are often limited opportunities for such interaction (Davis & Bryant, 2003). GVT leaders should also be technologically savvy and possess an ability to match the technology to the specific requirements of the team and its tasks (e.g., rich versus lean communication media); they must be engaging, culturally sensitive and approachable, by communicating frequently with all members (Davis & Bryant, 2003; Jonsen et al., in press; Zigers, 2002). Although there is much literature about the challenges of working in GVTs there is very little empirical research on actually leading GVTs (Joshi & Lazarova, 2005; Jonsen et al., in press;

Malhotra et al., 2007). In the following sections we highlight some of the literature that has aimed to address this gap with respect to leader competencies and styles seen as important for GVT performance.

### 2.1. Leader competencies

In GVTs "distance amplifies dysfunction" (Davis & Bryant, 2003, p. 310). To overcome the added challenges associated with distance and to prevent dysfunction, GVT leaders must possess certain competencies. Joshi and Lazarova (2005) sought answers to the question of what competencies are identified as important for leaders in multinational virtual teams. In their study of multicultural teams in a single corporation from around the globe, they compared the competencies identified by team members and leaders, as well as those considered important by team members who were collocated with and distant from their team leader. The following competencies were identified as important by a large percentage of team leaders and team members: direction and goal setting, communication, facilitating teamwork and motivating and inspiring. However, team leaders and team members differed in their views about other competencies. For example, managing cultural diversity was mentioned as important by 65% of team leaders, but only 5% of members. Empowering was mentioned only by team leaders, and mentoring and coaching and resource acquisition – only by team members.

Boundary spanning was more important for team members than leaders. Slight differences were found across countries. For example, boundary spanning was mentioned only by Anglo country respondents (from the U.S.A. and UK/Ireland). There were generally few respondents from countries other than the U.S.A., and statistical tests were not conducted to ascertain any meaningful cross-national differences. Davis and Bryant (2003) conducted interviews with 68 global virtual team members and leaders (all managers in MNEs located in Asia and Europe) and identified several competencies that leaders of GVTs must possess including that GVT leaders must engage in boundary spanning activities.

In their study of multicultural GVTs from Europe, Mexico and the U.S.A., Kayworth and Leidner (2001–2002) found that effective GVT leaders act as mentors, are communicative and are able to manage multiple leadership roles. They are also empathetic, and possess both a task-focus and relational skills (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Kayworth & Leidner, 2001–2002). And, they must be able to instill a sense of community or personal connection in the team to develop trust. Knowing when to switch between a task and relationship orientation is an important skill in achieving this goal. It thus appears that there are clear ideas about the competencies needed of global virtual team leaders, due to the specific contextual factors that determine these competencies. Yet, interestingly, research has also found differences in the views of GVT members and leaders regarding the qualities that are important for leading teams to success. One quality that stands out is the leader as boundary spanner, a still emergent topic in the literature.

### 2.2. Leadership styles

A number of studies have examined the effectiveness of transformational leadership in teams. In a single country study Carte, Chidambaram, and Becker (2006) found no differences between high and low performing teams regarding transformational leadership behaviors. Joshi, Lazarova, and Liao (2009) however found the opposite for multicultural geographically dispersed virtual teams. In highly geographically dispersed teams, a lack of shared context can jeopardize a shared team identity.

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