# 7. Negotiating an E-culture for virtual teams

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#### Learning outcome

You will recall the basics of negotiating an effective e-culture and apply selected approaches in order to identify best practices for your virtual team

Objectives

At the end of the session, you will be able to

* explain the processes and possible outcomes of negotiating an e-culture
* identify and evaluate best practices
* apply approaches in order to select best practices for your team

## 7.1 Prelude

In the previous two sessions, we became acquainted with the major challenges that VITeams need to tackle and got to know the MBI approach. In addition, we examined some theories with respect to the creation of mutuality and commonality in VITeams. The goal was the establishment of a team-based culture. This unit will help us to understand the basics of negotiating an electronically based team culture (E-culture) for virtual teams. Because the content and thus the outcome of the negotiation process cannot be predicted, a key focus in this session will be the introduction of best practices, including two approaches that will help us to find the best and most suitable path for our team.

#### Download: Learning journal for session 7

[Learning journal (.docx)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-07.docx) [Learning journal (.odt)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-07.odt) [Learning journal (.rtf)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-07.rtf)

## 7.2 Introduction

Without doubt, VITeams are becoming ever more commonplace and crucial for a whole host of business activities. These range from the development of a new product, to the provision of services and creative collaboration. Employing VITeams involves sourcing talent and expertise from around the world for a specific task and offers new opportunities for collaborative task completion. Today's almost universally accessible technology allows VITeams to bring together culturally diverse groups of individuals in order to enhance organisational performance, creativity and innovation. The interview clips that follow highlight some of the major benefits of VITeams:

### Task: Benefits of virtual teamwork

Watch the video clip and from the benefits mentioned, select those you consider to be of relevance for your VITeam and note them down in your learning journal.

Because VITeams have access to rich resources, combining practices, knowledge and experience, they are increasingly being called upon to leverage these resources in order to enhance performance. However, simply assembling teams does not necessarily translate into a high level of efficiency, as diversity not only functions as an enabler but can also function as a barrier to performance. One argument put forward in this session will be that VITeams simply need to be treated differently from face-to-face teams. This means that a team needs to evaluate which work processes work best for them and how to meet their own particular challenges. These could be, for example, temporal and geographical dispersion or the lingua franca used. A second area for consideration is that in order to benefit from the diversity of teams, team members need to leverage different work processes and thus negotiate an E-culture for their team. The assumption here is that a strong E-culture geared to meeting the needs of the VITeam will support the development of a strong and healthy team identity. In this way we can benefit from the diversity of its members as an enabler for team effectiveness and satisfaction. A third argument is that an E-culture can be expressly and deliberately developed and cultivated.

Session 5 already made a start in this direction when discussing the mutuality that can be created by employing the MBI approach. This laid the groundwork for the understanding that outlining differences and commonalities is a first step towards integrating differences. Bridging enabled the transition from this initial understanding to the successful integration of differences. Session 05 also provided a framework for developing an identity profile which can be used in the application of the MBI approach. In addition, session 06 (Challenges of VITeams) generated an awareness of areas particularly worthy of consideration and focus. What is missing is a more detailed practical perspective of how integration can actually be put to creative use. The focus of this session, therefore, is the introduction of tools and processes, which aid the leveraging and integration of different resources, with the aim of creating a synergetic E-culture.

## 7.3 Culture, interculturality and cultural negotiations, a quick review

In order to begin developing a team culture, it is helpful to adopt an actor-field perspective. From this viewpoint, we are primarily concerned with the members of the team and their cultural orientation. Inherent in the open perspective of culture is the acknowledgement that culture exists within human collectives. Typically, some of the collectives associated with the team members will be considered more relevant than others in each particular virtual teamwork environment and at any specific point in time. The term collective here refers to different types of groups such as professions, sports clubs, corporate organisations and nation states.

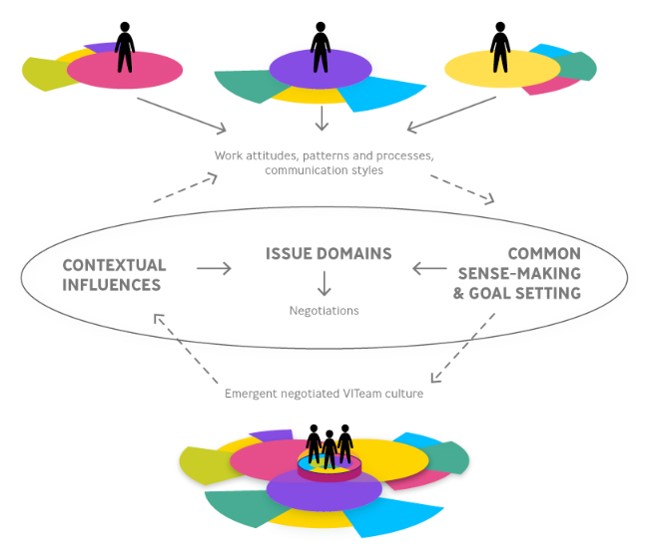
In our case, when diverse people meet for a specific purpose, they bring with them a range of assumptions. These could be for example their understanding of work processes, which they may have learned in the context of their professional socialisation and membership of collectives. When meeting other team members for the first time, participants are likely to perceive an atmosphere of unfamiliarity and possibly even strangeness due to differing understandings of work and working together. They find themselves in a situation where there is a lack of normality. With this absence of normality, plausibility and a lack of routinised actions, we can speak of 'interculturality'. Interculturality can thus be understood as a process of social interaction and communication in which the team members are involved in modifying their cultural practices in various ways, but at the same time attempting to assert their interests and objectives.

The result of this process is the emergence of a team culture related to the development of a work environment in which team members feel comfortable.  This happens when behavioural patterns are perceived as suitable and normal, and where team members behave in a way which makes sense to the team. Additionally, routine actions have been established which are understood and acceptable for all and are therefore shared. In order to achieve a situation where routine actions are accepted and shared by all, a process of negotiation is necessary. A negotiated culture thus indicates a reciprocally and collectively formed team culture that develops out of an interactive, communicative process involving all team members. A negotiated culture is -as with any culture- also fluid, which means that in the course of the team’s life cycle, renegotiations can take place as well as refinements of the team culture. A negotiated culture is therefore both the outcome and the beginning of a process. Developing an E-culture evolves therefore, requiring time and effort from all team members, as well as everyone's openness and willingness towards ongoing dialogue.

Apart from the openness and willingness to invest enough time and effort in the negotiation of an E-culture, the level of unfamiliarity or strangeness experienced by each team member may differ, and this needs to be considered too. Lastly, the negotiation process also depends on the quantity and relevance of the work areas involved. For example, in a team where all members are already experienced and confident in English as a lingua franca, there is little need to debate which language to use. This is different in teams with a mix of members who are unfamiliar with using English in a team setting and others who are quite conversant in English, even understanding different accents and nuances. In such a team constellation, members may, for example, come up with a solution where breaks are taken in order for some participants to discuss in their mother tongue. Alternatively, a team member might summarise important issues in a language other than English to make sure that all contributions are heard and understood.

## 7.4 Cultural leverage in teams or negotiating an E-culture

When we talk about negotiating culture or negotiated interculturality, we refer to the synchronisation of incompatible routines of interaction. The aim is to develop an e-culture which is shared by all team members and supports team performance and team satisfaction. Negotiation as such involves co-creation and the process of sense-making or generating common meaning. This starts with the analysis of domains that require negotiation. Subsequently, cultural attributes are modified, recombined, or adapted. The following is an illustration of such a process:

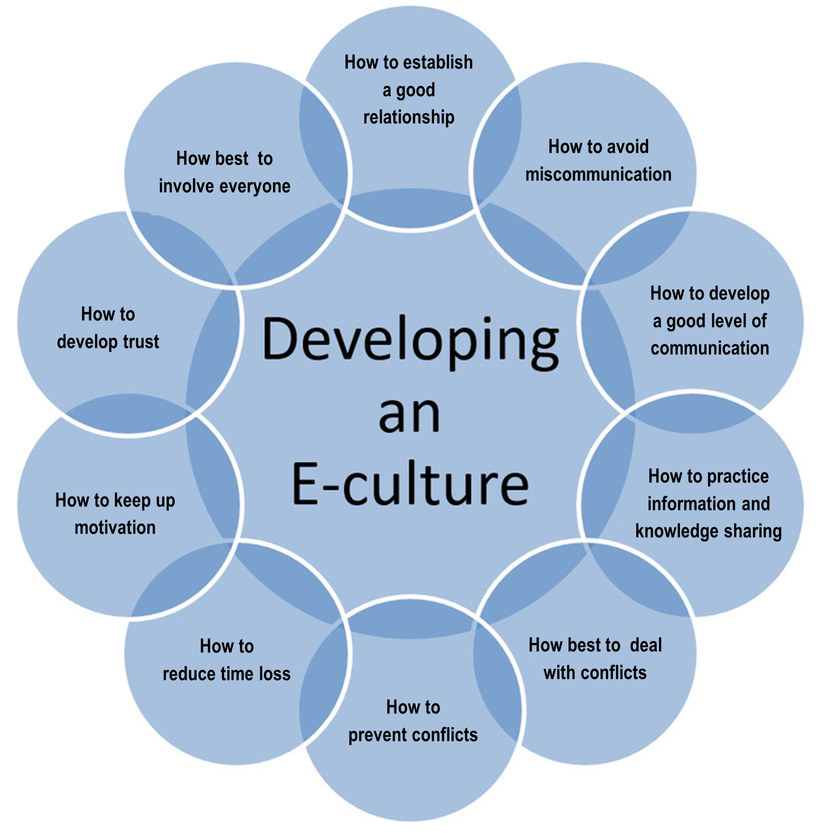


Source: Based on Brannen, Mary Yoko & Jane E. Salk (2000, p. 457)

Figure by Julia Flitta ([www.julia-flitta.com](http://www.julia-flitta.com/))

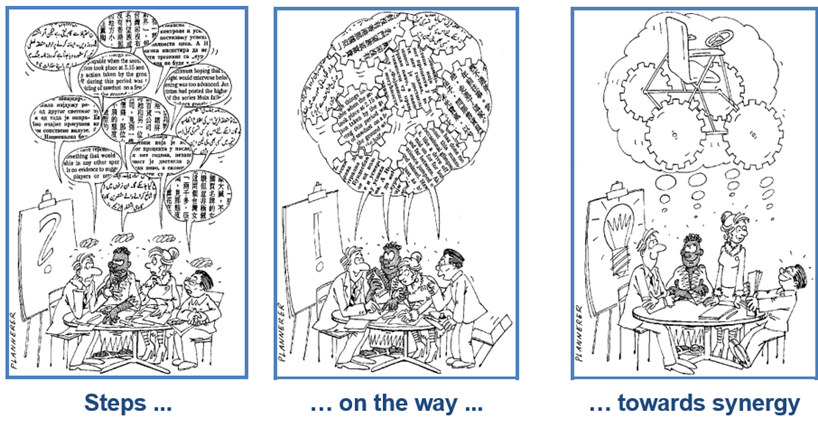
It shows actors coming together, bringing with them their work attitudes, patterns and processes as well as communication styles. In the process of team development, they need to assess which contextual factors are relevant and the degree of influence each one exerts . Contextual factors could be, for example, the organisational frameworks in which both the team and the individual members operate. Here we might expect to observe power and dependency issues. But contextual issues can also include areas such as family commitment or limited access to the internet. The process of team development then, is tied up with the notion of sense-making and meaning creation. We therefore need to focus on shared meanings. Examples of this could be the meaning and significance attached to deadlines or meetings. Finally, the goal and the vision, in other words the ‘what do we want to achieve together?’, needs to be clarified, and this will in turn determine many of the issue domains. Once the issue domains are clear, the team can then negotiate its team culture. The arrow pointing towards and away from the team and its negotiated culture indicates the processual character of culture development.

The illustration below provides an overview of team challenges and thus domains that may need to be part of the negotiation process:



The outcome of the negotiation process is unpredictable, but generally speaking several options are possible:

* *Divided labour*, which refers to a high level of separation of work and individual work areas. A team very quickly decides to allocate work packages and divide responsibilities, with each team member working on their own.
* *Complementing* each other refers to pooling resources such as knowledge and skills, with the aim of achieving a better outcome through this combination.
* *Adapting* refers to the ability and willingness to adjust one’s own behaviour and accept different and new behavioural patterns or work approaches in accordance with the situation and the team’s goals.
* Finding a middle way or *compromise* refers to the outcome of a negotiation whereby all team members 'give in' to a certain degree. An example would be a team that decides to start a team meeting with a short ‘social get together’. This could be, for example, not as long as some team members would prefer, but also, through its brevity, would accommodate those who would rather focus directly on work-related issues.
* *Novel ways* of interacting or synergies refer to the constructive approach of searching for new and innovative ways of working together. It is different from complementary approaches because it focuses on the added value of teamwork and the creation of something new through a combining process. Novel outcomes can develop when social interactions among team members trigger new interpretations and products, which the individual team members on their own would never have envisaged.



Source: Cartoon by Jörg Plannerer

This approach is therefore also referred to as the development of synergies, acknowledging that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, as the illustration indicates. It is therefore qualitatively different from the mere adding together all team members' contributions.

The following quote from an internship report illustrates an example of this kind of value creation:

*"Another example where the international team added value was when we were all working together on one analysis. While I for example got too much into detail and lost a lot of the time because I wanted it to be perfect, my colleague reminded me of what we still have left to do and why we should not get lost in detail. First, I thought this was not the way to go because we were not taking into account all the information we had but in the end I learnt that it was good to have the overall idea and look at the overall numbers. The way my colleagues were working was quite interesting because they defined a result they wanted to have and then found a way to get that result while I tried to do everything step by step towards the best result possible. By using a mix of both approaches we got a very meaningful analysis in the end and our boss was very happy with the result."*

What this quote highlights is the fact that value creation requires openness and time. It is therefore crucial that we set aside the time for this open-ended process to unfold.

## 7.5 An E-culture, best practices

People who work from a physical office space see and feel the culture of the company all around them. There are cues from the way people talk, the ways things look and the activity surrounding them. Because these are absent in a virtual team, virtual teams should pro-actively, explicitly and purposefully develop an e-culture. This process starts with the first get-together and continues throughout the entire teamwork. A positive team culture encourages team members to feel that they are visible, connected (virtually), respected and listened to.

A positive e-culture grows and evolves in the course of the team’s life cycle. It starts with an evaluation of the current situation with regard to team members' awareness of their own cultural diversity relative to other team members. Other initial steps involve the achievement of an understanding of the context in which the team works and the goals the team wishes to achieve. In order for this to be successful, the pro-active development of a team culture requires a general commitment to teamwork and openness.

In the following, examples of best practices are presented. All of these should give useful insights into how you might develop your own team e-culture.

Develop and commit to a communication charter

* Specify mutually agreed guidelines on how the team will communicate with regard to communication styles, communication approaches and information flow. This could involve, for example, who passes on what to whom; a common understanding of how to address each other; who and how conference calls will be facilitated; who should be copied 'cc' in emails; and how a sense of togetherness in calls can be created
* Specify which communication tools to use in which circumstances. This could regulate, for example, when to reply via email rather than picking up the phone. It is generally advisable to restrict the number of communication channels in order to ensure that everyone has access to them and can use them competently
* Agree on communication technologies that fit the team and its working environment
* Guide and assist participants in the use of the technologies chosen
* Specify how to ensure sound knowledge sharing and documentation procedures. This could involve outlining good routines and rituals in this regard and might, for example, specify whether hand-overs should be completed daily and which software should be used to share documents

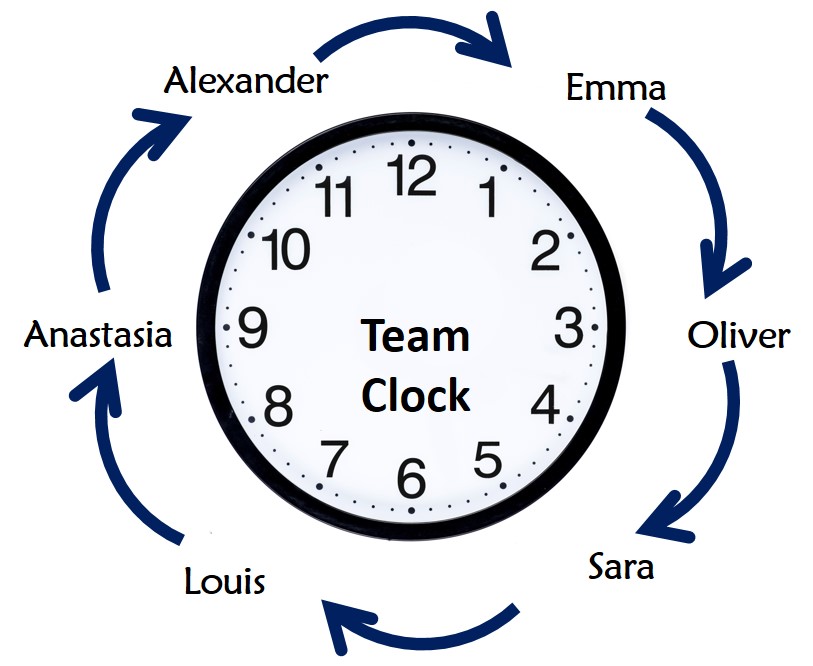
Clarify tasks and processes, not just roles and goals

* Specify and ensure clarity about work processes, for example who does what and when; how information should flow, and who sends what to whom
* Agree on areas which are non-negotiable and those which can be negotiated

Develop a common spirit and virtual closeness

* Agree on how to ensure that everyone is ‘on-board’. For example, you may want to start every meeting with a check-in, asking team members how they are and how they are feeling
* Agree on how to ensure common meanings relating to the content and agreements reached at a meeting. You may, for example close with everyone just noting what they will take away from the meeting
* Specify actions that help to hold the team together, for example by communicating daily or integrating the work processes of various team members
* Decide on mechanisms that encourage both the giving and receiving of constructive feedback, e.g. by considering when feedback is most appreciated and when it is not, as well as which media might be perceived as most appropriate
* Agree on what a voicing culture entails and how best to apply it. This will include clarification of what and how exactly to voice in which situation
* Specify how to ensure that everybody is being heard, e.g. by developing a team clock, an approach developed by Hildebrandt, Jehle, Meister, & Skoruppa (2013, p. 54)

A team clock



Clock image by OpenClipart-Vectors from Pixabay. Accessed 6 June 2021. [Pixabay License](https://pixabay.com/service/license/)

A team clock (Hildebrandt et al. 2013, p. 54) helps to structure airtime and also ensures that everybody's thoughts are being shared. Using the team clock you rotate and provide every team member with a specific speaking time. By doing so everybody knows when it is his or her turn to speak. A team clock is a good instrument to listen to different ideas and points of view and ensure that everybody is heard.

Establish a team rhythm

* Be disciplined in creating and enforcing rhythms in virtual team work (e.g. by holding meetings regularly and establishing and sharing the meeting agenda in advance)
* Ensure that there is enough time for socialising (e.g. by establishing a virtual water cooler or coffee break) to support the development of authentic human connections

A virtual coffee break



Photograph by Elena Martou

A virtual coffee break is a break during which time is intentionally allocated to low-fidelity activities such as chatting about personal issues, hobbies and family, or maybe films you have watched. You may also want to decide to have virtual coffee breaks to facilitate brainstorming and general reflection. The idea of a virtual coffee break is to compensate for the casual and informal talk people might have in a physical office space, thus contributing to a positive team spirit.

## 7.6 Approaches for finding best practices

Negotiating culture is a way of joining, overlapping and mixing cultures through interaction and communication. New cultural practices are generated, thus enabling routine actions to be established that are relevant and suitable for the team and the task. Culture production is based on an understanding of interculturality as a dynamic process involving the emergence and conscious development of a common culture within a specific context. Based on the interplay of action, reaction and adaptation, negotiation is an ongoing process and should be initiated purposefully during the forming stage of the team development process and should continue throughout a team’s life cycle.

With this in mind, the next step refers to the 'how' of this negotiation process. Two models will be introduced here to assist us in this regard, the *dune model* and *Bono's six thinking hats*. The *dune model* is helpful in establishing and clarifying the influence of contextual factors on negotiations within the team. *Bono’s six thinking hats* encourage viewing issues from new perspectives. This process can help to decide on practices that are well suited to the team.

The dune model

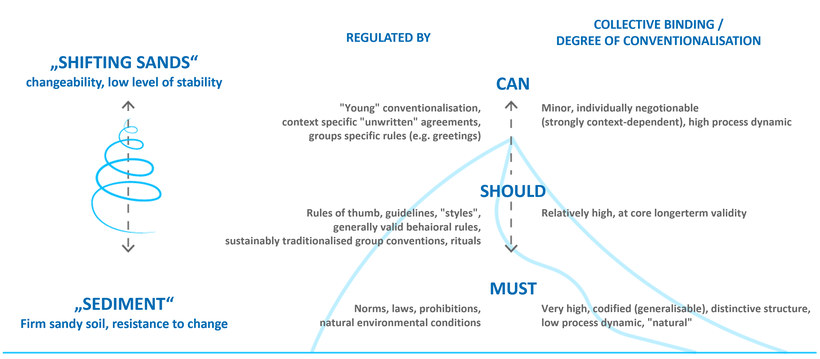
The dune model visualises behavioural rules and the potential for changing or amending them. Bolten (2014) uses three types of rules: These are the 'must', 'should', and 'could' rules. Within a social and organisational context, there may be rules which are not negotiable and may be even formalised in company laws and regulations.Therefore, they might have a binding force for team members and as such must be accepted. These are the 'must' rules. These could, for example, be company rules for reporting, data protection or codes of conduct. Other examples of rules which a team may see as binding could, for instance, relate to public and school holidays. The team may decide to consider them strictly as ‘non-working days’ regardless of work pressure.

The second category relates to generally valid behavioural rules and conventions which can be considered to be how one ‘should’ behave. Because they are not manifested in norms and laws, they can be changed by teams. An example for a ‘should’ rule is how employees are compensated. It might be common in a company to acknowledge achievements by giving out individual incentives and rewards. However, in a team context it may be possible to amend compensation incentives and address the needs of the team and find alternative ways to motivate team members. On a social level, a team might decide that team members should not work on the weekend but that this is not a 'must' rule.

Finally, we encounter the 'could' rules. These are conventions which may still be very young, are context specific and highly negotiable. Using the metaphor of the dune, these can easily be ‘blown away’ and therefore amended and changed, or simply become lost. Many of the issues related to work processes are likely to fall into this category. A ‘could’ rule, for example, might relate to rituals when starting a meeting, such as having a ‘check-in’ round where everybody quickly states how they feel.

The following is an illustration of the Dune model adapted from Jürgen Bolten (2014)

The dune model

[](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/pictures/images/vit-7-6-dune-model-hq.jpg)

Source: Based on Bolten, Jürgen (2014). [The Dune Model – or: How to Describe Cultures](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Juergen-Bolten/publication/311425195_The_Dune_Model_-_or_How_to_Describe_Cultures/links/58457c0308ae2d21756815fc/The-Dune-Model-or-How-to-Describe-Cultures.pdf). Reprinted with permission. Accessed 22 May 2024

Figure by Julia Flitta ([www.julia-flitta.com](http://www.julia-flitta.com/))

[Click on the image for a larger view](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/pictures/images/vit-7-6-dune-model-hq.jpg) (if necessary hold down the Ctrl key)

Applying this model to the creation of an e-culture means that team members need to develop an awareness of those context factors and behavioural rules which are binding (or ones they wish to be considered as binding), and those which can be amended, i.e. areas where there is greater scope for negotiation within the team.

### Task: My dune model

Considering a team you have been or are anticipating to be a member of, note down three rules you would place into the *must*, *should*, or *could* category. These can be company or social rules.

#### Bono's thinking hats

The idea of the six thinking hats by Edward de Bono dates back to the 60s. The idea behind the hats is that you cannot dig a hole in a different place by digging the same hole deeper. This means that trying harder in the same direction may not be as useful as changing direction. And you can change the direction of thinking by asking different questions, represented by the different coloured hats.

Applying Bono’s hats is therefore a strategy to develop flexible thinkers as they help to consider different perspectives. This can help you to find a way of reconciling different approaches of working in a team and finding a well suited approach for your team. It can also be used as a tool to handle difficult issues.

Let us start by looking at the different hats in more detail:

Illustrations by Marie Seeberger(<http://www.behance.net/marieseeberger>) [CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/deed.en)

The white hat calls for pure information, i.e. just simple facts. Possible questions that help to search for information might be: What do I know and what else should I know in order to be able to assess the situation adequately? What does the information I have tell me? What questions should I be asking?

The red hat signifies feelings, hunches and intuition. It is through the red hat you express emotions and feelings and share fears, likes, dislikes, loves and hates. Questions which might elicit feelings could be: How did I feel earlier on, how do I feel now? What are my feelings and emotions around the issues at stake?



The black hat relates to logic. Can we identify the reasons? Why are things not working? It identifies the difficulties and dangers, and where things may go wrong. This is probably the most powerful and useful hat, but it can be problematic when overused. What do I need to be cautious about?   
What could be difficult? What could we improve?   
What could go wrong?

The yellow hat symbolises brightness and optimism. Under this hat you explore the positives and probe for value and benefit. Is there anything positive I can take away from this situation regardless of my critical approach? What could be possible benefits?

The green hat refers to creativity, possible alternatives and new ideas. Or it could be considered to be an opportunity to express new concepts and new perceptions. What other options do I have to handle the situation (e.g. playfully, with humor)? Are there any other or new ideas? Is there a new way to do this?

The blue hat manages the thinking process; it controls the ‘thinking outside of the box’ mechanism and thus refers to reflection: Where do I stand and what is it I have to do next? The blue hat relates to management or in other words, what is the subject? What are we thinking about? What is the goal? Can we see the big picture?

There are different ways of using Bono's thinking hats. One idea is to think back to a situation that irritated you where you were not sure how to respond. Instead of responding immediately, take your time and use the Bono's hats in order to find an adequate response and possibly even a solution. This can then lead to a new routine or approach that could become an integral part of your team culture. Let us look at an example for this.

#### Example: Case "Understanding and meeting deadlines"

Moniq is rather unhappy with the behaviour of her colleague Richard. Ever since he joined her VITeam three weeks ago, he has not met a single agreed deadline. She spends a considerable amount of time reminding him and becomes increasingly annoyed about his behaviour. She is also afraid that the project will suffer as a consequence. She considers whether to escalate this by bringing it to the attention of their boss…

Before making a decision, she applies Bono's Thinking Hats and comes up with the following:

**White hat / Facts**: What do I know?

Richard joined the team only three weeks ago. I don’t really know anything about him and am not familiar with his cultural or personal background. In what kind of situation is he in right now? Maybe he has family issues, maybe he has a different understanding of what is meant by deadline, maybe he feels a bit overwhelmed with the novelty of the task and doesn’t feel comfortable enough to admit it? Or maybe he is unmotivated because he was pushed into joining our team?

**Red hat / Emotions**: What are my feelings and concerns?

I am actually frustrated and angry because Richard is just not doing his job. I have been working with this team for a long time and really feel committed to the team spirit and doing a good job.

**Black hat / Judgmental**: What are worst-case scenarios?

Richard keeps missing deadlines and the project fails. If I escalate the case and this turns into a personal conflict between us, which could also endanger the project's success and make everyone miserable in the process.

**Yellow hat / Optimistic**: Is there anything positive about this situation? Am I actually being too stubborn about the issue of meeting deadlines and stifling from my own anger? Are the deadlines simply not realistic? Is this situation telling me that I might be working too hard and am missing out on my private life?

Maybe we, as a team need to rethink the setting of deadlines and how to approach milestones? Maybe we are not being realistic about them and could rethink them to save us from being too stressed.

**Green hat / Creativity**: What options do I have?

Instead of escalating this, Moniq decides to find out more about her colleague Richard and schedules a phone call with him. She also decides to review the milestones they have established critically. Another decision she makes is to take an afternoon off and clear her mind.

**Blue hat / Direction**: Where do I stand and what are my next steps?

With the knowledge, ideas and thoughts she gathered she decides to not directly accuse Richard, but to review milestones and take up the issues in her team from a more general perspective. She also initiates a discussion in the team as to how they could improve their approach to deadlines and develop a common understanding about this. What she could envisage is to establish a traffic light system whereby the green light indicates that there are still two weeks to go, the yellow light shows that the deadline is approaching and the red light indicates that the deadline has not been met. She could also envisage establishing a routine whereby every team member briefly reports  where they stand at the beginning of their meeting and whether they anticipate problems meeting the deadline. Whatever practice they decide upon, this would then become part of their e-culture.

The thinking hats can also be used in your team, for example prior to making a decision, as the hats will help the team to consider different viewpoints and ways of moving towards a good solution. It provides them with a wider and much more detailed picture of the options, and it allows emotions and scepticism to be brought into the picture as well. The following is an example:

#### Example: Case "Independence vs teamwork orientation"

Andy, Martha and Nuri are members of a project team. They have developed their identity profiles and started to chart out how they want to work together. Martha is a very independent person whereas Nuri values cooperation and would rather that they work together on tasks as a team as much as possible. Together they apply Bono’s hats to evaluate how they might reconcile these two approaches.

**White hat / Facts**: What do I know? Here it would be helpful for Martha and Nuri to highlight what they mean by pursuing independent and a cooperative working styles. Martha may be arguing that working independently allows her to schedule her work according to her own rhythm and irrespective of time zone differences. She may also say that working on her own enables her to concentrate better and be more effective. Nuri might say that he is better able to generate ideas when talking to people rather than sitting down in front of his computer and that it doesn’t bother him  whether he works at night or during the day.

**Red hat / Emotions**: What are my feelings and concerns? If they perform most of the tasks together as a team, what could Martha's concerns be? Would she worry that they will spend too much time on tedious discussions and thus risk missing deadlines? Or would she fear that the team might get into arguments over issues which are difficult to solve online? She might feel that she won't be able to show what she is capable of when she is dependent on the other team members. What could Nuri’s concerns be? Maybe that he might lose track of what Martha is doing and so fail to see the overall picture? It could also be that he feels working on his own all the time is uninspiring and that he will miss the social aspects of working together. He might fear that Martha will present the team with finished results and will no longer be willing to compromise on issues. He could also worry that if they don’t work together closely they may need more time at the end to integrate all the parts. Added to this, he strongly believes that working together brings out the best ideas.

**Black hat / Judgmental**: What are worst-case scenarios? What is the worst thing that could go wrong if they decide to work independently or cooperatively? The worst thing that could happen if every team member works independently is likely to be that the team's results are a patchwork and the different parts do not fit. If they work cooperatively, the worst scenario is likely to be that they become engaged in endless discussion, lose track of what they are supposed to be doing and struggle to meet the deadline. In both instances they could end up with poor results.

**Yellow hat / Optimistic**: Is there anything positive about this situation? It could encourage Martha and Nuri as well as Andy to think about the pros and cons of both working approaches and put these into perspective.

**Green hat / Creativity**: What options do we have? There are various options as part of the negotiation process. However, with the previous discussion in mind it may be helpful to go through the work schedule and identify those areas which can best be tackled independently and those areas where cooperation is most effective. Because Nuri and Andy are not concerned about working times, they might want to accommodate and follow Martha’s daily rhythm when scheduling their meetings. They could also install a system to structure their meetings and speaking time in order to use their time together constructively.

**Blue hat / Direction**: Where do we stand and what are our next steps? The team may decide on a trial phase and follow a mixture of cooperative and independent work approaches and re-evaluate after a couple of weeks.

Their agreed working style would then become part of their e-culture.

What both approaches offer is that they facilitate constructive and complementary utilisation of the differences and contradictions inherent to interculturality. It is important that the results of these approaches flow into the development of an e-culture, which should then fit both the task and the team members, enabling each one of them to flourish.

## 7.7 Summary

Developing an e-culture for is especially important for VITeams because many of the cues that members of in-person teams use to establish how 'things are done around here' are lacking. In particular, working together virtually calls for agreement on work routines, communication processes and a commitment to the development of a common spirit and virtual closeness. Teams that set aside time and resources to pro-actively establish and agree on an e-culture and thus a positive work climate are likely to avoid unnecessary problems and misunderstandings. Developing an e-culture therefore has the potential to bring out the best in teams and lays the groundwork for the emergence of synergies.

The Dune model and Bono's six thinking hats are two approaches that help to identify best practices for a team. Whereas the Dune model enables a team to establish basic parameters for their teamwork, Bono’s hats help us to identify best working routines for the team. By asking a variety of questions, Bono's hats encourage team members to consider different perspectives and thereby find the most suitable solution. In addition, both approaches have the advantage of being simple to implement.

## 7.8 Learning review

The following learning review is largely reproduced from a learning activity originally developed as part of the ICOPROMO project (MCT\_Tension\_in\_MCTs.doc (uc.pt) [https://www.ces.uc.pt/  
icopromo/materials/MCT\_Tension\_in\_MCTs.pdf](https://www.ces.uc.pt/icopromo/materials/MCT_Tension_in_MCTs.pdf), accessed on 21.12.2020). It contains state­ments which were written as part of a reflective essay following a team project between a group of Austrian and US students. The Austrian team included Austrian nationals as well as international students, whereas the US team was solely made up of US nationals.

The statements collected have been edited slightly and are indicative of the various issues and problems that surfaced during teamwork. It is very likely that similar situations may occur in business settings.

The names (changed) and nationalities of the team members are as follows:

Austrian team:

* Anton, an Austrian national
* Jiri, an international student from the Czech Republic
* Carmen, an international student from Spain

US-American team

* John, a US national
* Ashley, a US national
* Jenny, a US national

### Task: Case "An Austrian-US-American teamwork" (Part 1)

This first round of reflections will relate to the 'getting to know each other' phase.

The following statements and extracts from the reflective essay illustrate three different phases in the development of the teams. Considering the team challenges as well as the best practices we have seen, read through the statements and for each project phase:

* Identify the challenges the team is facing.
* Note down what may be causing the issues that surface.

Write down your answers in your learning journal.

Phase 1: Getting off to a start

*Anton (Austrian team member)*

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

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

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

Jiri (Austrian team member)

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

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

John (US-American team member)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ashley (US-American team member)

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

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

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

The second round of reflections are focussed on the storming phase of the team's development.

Phase 2: Unexpected tensions and issues

Anton (Austrian team member)

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

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

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

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

Jiri (Austrian team member)

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

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

Carmen (Austrian team member)

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

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

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

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

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

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

John (U.S. team member)

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

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

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

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

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

Jenny (U.S. team member)

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

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

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

Finally, the third round of reflections will show the norming and performing.

Phase 3: Getting to a good finale?

*Anton (Austrian team member)*

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

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

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

Jiri (Austrian team member)

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

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

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

Carmen (Austrian team member)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

John (US-American team member)

*"The last couple of weeks of the quarter were difficult for me to fully participate in my group. I had to move to New York City and at this point my communication with the rest of the team diminished."*

*"… Especially, with being in office training from 8am-10pm in NYC for the last two weeks I have fallen out of touch with my group's progress. It would have been nice to know how our presentation went and to have contributed in the final stages of its completion."*

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

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

*"All of this confusing could have been avoided if prior to setting the deadlines I would have informed all of my teammates that there was a very high possibility that my life was going to slide into complete chaos a few weeks before I left for New York City, that they should proceed on without me, and my assignments might be a few days late. I should have also taken on some none crucial assignments so that the project could proceed and my work could just be added to the final product and would not serve as the backbone of the project."*

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

Ashley (US-American team member)

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

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

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

*"After confirming they would attend the meeting, neither Jenny nor John showed up for the meeting. At this point, I was annoyed with their work ethic and unreliable attitude of the US-American team members."*

*"… I am conflict-avoidant: I spoke with Jenny and John on a few occasions, asking them to contribute more to the group, cite their sources, and attend scheduled meetings. However, I did not want to argue with my team."*

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

Jenny (U.S. team member)

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

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

*"I also think that on my part of the group work anyways, I lacked the technology to effectively communicate with the Austrian group members."*

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

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

### Task: Case "An Austrian-US-American teamwork" (Part 2)

1. Think about and note down in your learning journal what the team could have done to avoid the issues that surfaced, applying the dune model as well as Bono's thinking hats and giving three examples.
2. Use the results of your analysis to sketch out elements of an e-culture that encompasses a communication charter, specifying tasks and processes, developing a common team spirit and working rhythm.

## 7.9 Sources, further reading and web links

#### Sources

* Barmeyer, C. (2018). Konstruktives Interkulturelles Management. Göttingen: Vandenhoek & Ruprecht.
* Bolten, J. (2014). The Dune Model – or: How to describe cultures. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311425195\_The\_Dune\_Model\_-\_or\_How\_to\_  
  Describe\_Cultures](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311425195_The_Dune_Model_-_or_How_to_Describe_Cultures) (accessed on 26.6.2024)
* Hildebrandt, M., Jehle, L., Meister, S., & Skoruppa, S. (2013). Closeness at a Distance. Leading Virtual Groups to High Performance. Oxfordshire: Libri.
* Warner, M. (2001). Complex problems, negotiated solutions. Tools to reduce conflict in community development. London: ITDG Publishing.

#### Recommended reading

* Bolten, J. (2014). The Dune Model – or: How to describe cultures. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311425195_The_Dune_Model_-_or_How_to_Describe_Cultures> (accessed on 26.6.2024)
* Management Centre (2015). Six Thinking Hats: how to work out what’s a good idea. <http://www.managementcentre.co.uk/downloads/6TH.pdf> (accessed on 21.1.2019).

This article introduces the approach and application of the Six Thinking Hats

#### Weblinks

* The 'Dune Model' YouTube video explains and illustrates the dune model.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7Jb-X4NLGs> (accessed on 19.12.2020)

* Edward de Bono and his thinking hats, an explanation can be found under

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3ew6h5nHcc> (accessed on 19.12.2020)

* How to apply Bono's thinking hats is illustrated in the following YouTube video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PASrBGtcrdU> (accessed on 19.12.2020)