# 5. Creating mutuality in intercultural and interdisciplinary virtual teams

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#### Learning outcome

By creating identity profiles according to the principles of the MBI model (mapping, bridging and integrating), you will understand how mutuality and commonality in an intercultural and interdisciplinary virtual team can be created.

#### Objectives

At the end of the session, you will

* explain and apply the MBI approach
* explain and develop an identity profile
* identify commonalities and differences that influence teamwork
* explain how mutuality can be created
* apply activities that further mutuality
* develop criteria to enable the negotiation of a productive and synergetic culture

## 5.1 Prelude

In the previous session you learned that team members occupy different social and functional roles. In addition, you gained insights into which particular roles you might flourish when working in a team. Whichever roles these are, each and every person is key in supporting the team, mitigating differences and creating mutuality. How this can be achieved is the focus of this unit.

### Task: Which teams perform best?

Let's start with a question: Which teams do you believe will perform better, those which are diverse or those which are homogeneous?

Take three minutes to note down your answer in your learning journal.

Here is how Henry W. Lane, who majored in organisational behaviour, and Martha Maznevski, who completed her PhD with research on multicultural teams, have answered this question in their book on "Organisational Behaviour".

###### Sample answer

Lane and Maznevski argue that the question is complex and the answer depends on a variety of factors, such as the definition of diversity and performance employed. They say that by nature, people with a diverse background are able to contribute different perspectives, and if the team's task is one which is structured and routinized, these may not be called for. However, if the team's objective is to develop a strategy for market entry or other innovative processes, different perspectives are likely to generate solutions which are more appropriate and effective.

According to Lane and Maznevski, the main question, however, is how the full potential of a diverse team can be leveraged. They emphasise that this requires skilful management of interactions within the team so that diversity can be harnessed in a way which generates new and better ways of doing business.

Considering our definition of culture, we might say that a completely homogenous virtual team does not really exist because our team members will naturally display differences, such as different levels and areas of knowledge, different educational and professional backgrounds, different ages and self-identities. Therefore, it is important for every team to explore their differences and commonalities and use these for the benefit of the team. The aim of this session is thus to introduce you to the so called MBI approach. In this endeavour you will use identity profiles to support the mapping process as a first step towards mitigating differences.

#### Download: Learning journal for session 5

[Learning journal (.docx)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-05.docx) [Learning journal (.odt)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-05.odt) [Learning journal (.rtf)](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/documents/Learning-Journal-VIT-05.rtf)

## 5.2 Introduction

Diversity and thus heterogeneity has become a mainstream topic in global business. This is not only due to the growing interconnectedness of all business areas but also due to an increasingly diverse, mobile workforce and marketplace, changing workforce demographics, scarcity of labour and the availability of global internet access. These developments have facilitated the organisation and growth of work groups whose members come from a wide range of diverse backgrounds.

These diverse backgrounds indicate membership of different collectives, which can be linked to characteristics such as education, family history, profession, gender, languages and lifestyles. Membership of these collectives influences a range of factors, such as the resources and capabilities members are able to bring to the team; the expectations members harbour with regard to working styles and the way members expect to communicate with each other.

In the workplace environment, culturally diverse teams provide a vast number of opportunities to increase performance, creativity and innovation. However, they equally throw up some challenges which need to be faced and overcome. One of the first tasks is therefore to identify the level and type of homogeneity and heterogeneity of a team and develop strategies that will enable the team to utilise and benefit from its diversity in order to achieve its goal. In other words, a team which ignores its diversity and is not willing and/or ready to manage this issue will find it difficult to fully mature as a team. The purpose of this unit is thus to introduce the MBI approach as a tool to identify commonalities and differences and investigate how these can be used to benefit the team. This 'MBI' approach involves mapping (M), bridging (B) and integration (I).

While the Tuckman model illustrated the process of team development, the MBI approach is a tool which can enhance the quality of the team’s performance by making commonalities and differences explicit and generating a discussion centred around ways of creating mutuality. As a tool, it can be applied during the initiating phase and at any time during the norming phase when anybody in the team feels that there is an issue.

## 5.3 The MBI approach in a virtual environment

Lane and Maznevski (2019) identified three steps that team members should move through in order to identify the resources available within the team and to use these to their full potential. These are mapping, bridging and integration (MBI).

Mapping involves detecting, describing and understanding the differences and commonalities among team members and the impact these differences might have on teamwork. The metaphor of mapping has thus been chosen quite deliberately since a map is an image that helps people to navigate a new territory. A map needs to be accurate and its level of detail and scale should be appropriate for the purpose of the journey. In our context we refer to a map that displays social features and whose data, in contrast to a geographical map, are difficult to verify. However, if they are carefully constructed and self-ascribed, such maps are very helpful, especially at the beginning but also during the entire course of the teamwork.

While mapping is about getting to know and understanding other team members, this understanding provides little benefit if it is not accompanied by bridging. Bridging refers to communicating and establishing areas of common ground among team members. In other words, it is the process of developing common meaning, while considering all the differences among team members.

The last step, integrating, refers to the management of differences and integration of the various perspectives among team members. The objective during this process is not just to resolve any differences, but to utilise them in order to generate added value and thus create new perspectives and practices as well as innovative approaches with regard to a task and its solution.

Let's look at each step in more detail:

In order to construct a map to illustrate the cultural makeup of team members, we first need to consider which factors should be included in such an analysis. People normally expect others to think and act in the same way they do themselves and usually that this is also considered to be the correct and best way. This, however, is a fallacy, as people have different approaches to all manner of issues such as conducting financial analyses, styles and channels of communication, ways of addressing short-term problems and resolving conflicts. At the same time, it would be wrong to simply think that ‘other people’ are necessarily always different.

So therefore the question that arises is: ‘In which aspects might our team members differ?’ and ‘How many details do we need to know and which reference points should be used?’. There is, of course no general rule as to how thoroughly these questions should be answered, but points to consider are the level of virtuality and perceived differences, the complexity of the task, the amount of time at their disposal, the type of team, as well as the cultural awareness of the team members. A common tool to sketch out differences and commonalities is the diversity wheel originally developed by Loden and Rosener in the 90s. It is commonly used as an instrument for illuminating the areas of diversity that may be present in an organisation or team and it can help identify relevant collectives and diversity dimensions.

The introduction of the diversity wheel sparked lively discussion. One of the results of this discussion was a call for further diversity dimensions to be considered in the original wheel. The same discussion, however, also recommended limiting the number of dimensions outlined, thereby focusing on those which really make an impact on team performance and are therefore relevant in each particular context. The model below was developed by Gardeswartz and Rowe (2003). When using the wheel for mapping cultural differences in a virtual team, it is important to bear in mind that individual and group based differences intermingle in this model.



Source: Based on Gardenswartz and Rowe 2003, adapted

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

The wheel starts in the middle with personality, i.e. the characteristics of each person. This includes for example whether a person tends to be more extroverted or introverted, active or passive, but also how these factors influence interaction with others, and how the person is perceived by others. The internal dimensions relate to aspects that a person cannot influence such as age or physical abilities, and aspects which are usually not changed such as gender, sexual orientation and religious affiliation. In the context of the United States of America, race and ethnicity are also commonly included in this layer. All of these aspects are seen to have a bearing on how a person is treated and perceived by others during interaction.

The third layer depicts the outcome of life experiences and life paths. Commonly, ten dimensions are listed in this context such as education, income and marital status. Depending on how these aspects are valued by the corresponding interaction partner and whether they are seen to be connected, they may influence how these aspects interfere with or affect teamwork. The fourth layer includes elements that are linked to work and organisational contexts. They include hierarchical as well as functional aspects of working life and how a person relates to them in the context of diversity.

The diversity wheel is generally seen as an instrument to sensitise people with regard to diversity issues and make diversity visible among people who work together, thereby raising awareness but also understanding and acceptance. In the context of teamwork, the wheel may be used as an orientation to identify membership of collectives which might be influential when working together. For example, it might bring to light the fact that people in the team belong to different age cohorts. The critical point then is whether this is relevant for task performance and team satisfaction as well as what this may mean in terms of working together. It might also show that team members are very different with regard to their work experience. Digging deeper could show, for example, that some members have profound technical experience, which can be a real asset when working in a virtual environment. This means that the diversity wheel can be used as an initial means of orientation in order to assess which differences might be relevant. After this self-ascribed categorisation, the team can then assess what particular memberships of collectives might mean in the context of their teamwork.

One of the key insights from implementing this process is that that the factors contributing to perceived and real team diversity can vary from one team to another. Some factors will therefore be more or less relevant for teamwork, depending on the context. Also the factors contributing to diversity are not stable, but many of them can change over time. Coupled with the understanding that we need to acknowledge self-ascription and self-identification, the diversity wheel can be used as a basic framework and orientation to acknowledge differences and commonalities in a virtual team.

### Task: My diversity wheel

Imagine you work in an intercultural and interdisciplinary team. Use the diversity wheel as an orientation framework and note down a few things you think you should share with your team members in order for them to get to know you well. Keep these notes in your learning journal.

An important element in mapping is asking ourselves how we want to work together. Lane et al. (2019) introduce five cultural dimensions, elaborated by GlobeSmart, which they consider to offer a good combination of validity and practical relevance. These are: task versus relationship, independence versus interdependence, egalitarianism versus status, directness versus indirectness and risk versus certainty. Because virtuality is closely linked to real or perceived proximity and time differences, it makes sense to add the dimensions of space and time when mapping virtual teams.

When we use dimensions for mapping in this way, we acknowledge individual orientations as well as the images connected to individuals in a specific context. Mapping then takes place by locating people on a scale between a low and high level of orientation. This, of course, can never provide a truly accurate reflection of a person’s behaviour. One reason for this is that we have a certain understanding of the concept for comparison when we place ourselves on a scale. Developing a common meaning for concepts is thus an important pre-condition when using cultural dimensions for mapping. In addition, it is also possible that although we have a general cultural orientation, we may not behave in accordance to this in particular circumstances.

### Task: The meaning of work

The following is a list of possible associations linked to work. Think about what work means to you and how people's different associations with the concept ‘work’ could influence working together in a team:

1. Fulfilment
2. Earning a good income
3. Keeping myself busy
4. Feeding my family
5. Providing social contacts
6. Doing something useful
7. Gaining prestige and status
8. Other

The first dimension, **task versus relationship** refers to the fact that team members need to take care of the tasks at hand. Thus, the question to be asked here is 'what needs to get done?'. The opposite end of this continuum would rather consider the social links between team members and their social well-being. In a team there may be members who primarily want to focus on the task at hand and whose priority is to produce results, thereby placing a lot of emphasis on goal setting, structures and schedules. There may be others who consider it very important to get to know each other before going about the task, thus focussing more on interactions in order to foster positive team relationships and the well-being of its members.

Whereas both are committed to completing the task, the ways of reaching this goal might be quite different. Task-oriented team members want to get started with their work quickly and consider relationship building as something which may develop as the work progresses. They are likely to be the team members who propose putting structures in place and developing a step by step plan in order to get the work done. They are also likely to be the ones who are very particular about deadlines, workplace procedures and reaching milestones. They tend to be task efficient and productive in particular at the beginning of team work. However, they may find it difficult to establish trust on a deeper level, which is particular important in virtual teamwork.

### Task: Task vs relationship orientation

The following is a quote from a learning journal of a person who realised that there were people in the team who were task oriented and others who were more relationship oriented. Think about the potential issues this might bring to light:

"Some of my team members are completely focussed on task achievement, which does not leave any room for achievements on a team spirit or empathetic level, especially when members are not very open-minded. My personal wish and willingness to connect on a more personal level in order to establish a basis of trust was completely incompatible with the wishes and willingness of others."

In contrast to those who are more task-oriented, strongly relationship-oriented team members have a desire to get to know the team members on a more personal level and believe that if they know each other and understand the background of team members they are better able to communicate and avoid critical issues. This line of reasoning states that once a stable relationship has been developed and team members are being 'looked after', miscommunication is less likely to occur. Because they are willing to invest time and effort in meeting the team member’s needs and engaging in casual interactions, a non-competitive and conducive work atmosphere is likely to develop, which will support motivation and reduce dissatisfaction with the task at hand. They are likely to view a good relationship among team members and a positive work atmosphere as central to being able to deliver optimal performance.

The second dimension, 'independent versus interdependent' refers to the preference of working alone rather than coordinating with and helping each other to complete tasks. 'Independent' therefore means pursuing one’s own ideas and personal goals and staying in control of events. In contrast, a tendency towards 'interdependence' is based on the understanding that the task can only be accomplished through mutual cooperation and reliance. It highlights responsiveness towards the needs and expectations of others as well as a readiness to support other team members. In order to achieve this, a positive working atmosphere is key, as well as the feeling of a sense of loyalty and duty towards the other team members. It follows that team members who value interdependence over independence are likely to approach teamwork very differently. Interdependent team members, for example, are likely to require frequent interactions, assign roles as and when necessary and are flexible in their approach. On the other hand, independent team members are more likely to work confidently on their own and report back to the team when a scheduled task is completed. For them it is important that roles, once assigned, remain static and that rescheduling and flexibility remains at a minimum. Hofstede ID/IDV

Interactions are important for team members with both independent and interdependent tendencies, however the extent to which they value collective effort differs and will influence their assumptions towards the optimal way a team should work together.

### Task: Different expectations

Read the following example and consider the different expectations inherent in having a strong notion of independence and interdependence.

Yunita is based in Indonesia and a new member of a project team that works virtually from different regions of the world. One of her colleagues is Kevin, who is based in the Netherlands. Kevin has been tasked with 'on-boarding' her, including answering any questions she might have in order to fit in well with the team. Yunita is very happy to have someone as competent and helpful as Kevin. For this reason she is surprised when she calls him again one day with a question, and receives the reply: "Yunita, I think I told you that a couple of times already. Look, I am really happy to help you out when you cannot help yourself, but I have a full desk of work myself. Could you please think about the solution yourself next time, and then get back to me when you really don't know the answer?"

Yunita is somewhat disappointed. From her point of view, being in a team means that she can ask colleagues who are simply faster at completing a task than others. The greater the mutual support in her opinion, the deeper the trust in the team would be. She would have been very happy to help Kevin with any task he might have for her, even if "he could do it by himself".

The third dimension, **egalitarian versus status** refers to how power and responsibilities are allocated and distributed. An equality oriented member of a team is one who believes that all team members are more or less equal and power and responsibilities should therefore be shared as evenly as possible. The assumption is that issues are discussed and decided upon together and that everyone is expected to contribute towards the task at hand. Organisations that have an **equality** orientation have flat hierarchies, which means that teams have a lot of independence and are allowed to make high level decisions. This means that they might even be able to decide on the recruitment of other team members, their compensation or performance assessment. The aim of such a working environment is to maximise employee commitment and bring out the best in each person.

### Task: Hierarchical versus status orientation

The following quote from an internship report illustrates the hierarchical and status oriented structure within a team. Read the quote and answer the question as to how this might influence their teamwork.

"I perceived the work environment as very positive and the teamwork went quite smoothly. However, after some time I realized one thing that I was not used to and that is that the team structure is very hierarchical. Actually, everything works via titles. It is not just in the team itself. Throughout the company there is a strict path of upward mobility. Once you have finished a traineeship the first position or title is analyst. Next step would be associate, then senior associate followed by director."

Source: Learning journal, 2020

In contrast to egalitarian cultures, status oriented cultures expect decisions to be made by superiors and employees are expected to ask questions. Power and responsibility are distributed on a vertical level, which calls for a benevolent and empathetic team leader who makes decisions, maintains an overview of all tasks, allocates roles and additionally makes sure that the different parts fit together. In such an environment, team members expect to be taken care of and the team leader is the one who takes the blame when things go wrong as well as the praise when the work is done well. Team members who are status-oriented are likely to display a high level of sensitivity and respect towards other people’s achieved status, be it through education, performance or merit, but also on the basis of family background, age or heritage, for example.

The fourth dimension, **directness versus indirectness**, relates to a team member’s communication style. Somebody who values a direct communication style has a preference for frank, concise and to the point way of communicating. The aim is to be as clear as possible, leaving very little room for interpretations and ambiguity, thus ensuring swift and effective communication. This remains the case even when addressing difficult or critical issues, e.g. when giving feedback or when finding errors in the work performed. Direct communication is based on the understanding that the person and the message can be separated, thus avoiding embarrassment threats to a person's 'face'. Short and precise messages, written minutes of meetings and detailed instructions with little reference to non-verbal cues and interpretations are typical for this communication style.

*"The physical distance between us due to online communication encouraged me to leave my comfort zone. It usually takes some time before I feel comfortable to open up to strangers and voice my opinion directly. But realising that we are all in the same situation and that I can trust my team members made it a lot easier for me. Not being able to meet in person taught me to approach people more openly and gave me confidence to voice my opinion in a collaborative way."*

Source: Learning journal, 2020

People who have a preference for indirect speech use different ways of conveying the message and tend to communicate in a way that leaves room for interpretation. Pauses, silence, tone of voice, and body language are important parts of the overall communication. When communicating the focus is on the receiver of the message and an understanding that other people may have different views on the subject, that everybody operates within a certain context and that reading between the lines opens avenues for exploring areas of common ground without pinpointing any dissonance and thus avoiding embarrassment. Indirect communicators know that gathering additional information from sources other than words such as body language or context is required in order to grasp the meaning of the message. By ‘reading between the lines’ and using nuanced tones in communication, indirectness is very relationship and person-focused and aims at being respectful and showing courtesy to the receiver of the message. Face-to-face meetings and verbal agreements are typical for indirect communicators.

The fifth dimension, **risk versus certainty**, involves considering how much information is required before acting. Of course we all plan our actions, but how many details do we require and how much room do we leave for unforeseeable and unpredictable circumstances? Team members who are risk-oriented emphasise quick actions and are ready to go ahead on the basis of some basic information providing them with an initial orientation. They trust that through flexibility and the thorough monitoring of the a project's progress, they can make the necessary adjustments as they go along. Thus they are relatively tolerant to change and are usually not bound by too many rules and regulations.

The following is an example of how this difference may surface in behaviour:

Richard is an engineer with an upcoming presentation in front of an group of international colleagues. He has worked on his presentation for a long time in order to give his colleagues all the technical details they need to implement a new piece of software. After about an hour into his presentation, Jenny raises her hand and points out: "Richard, thanks for your presentation, but it is possible that you just tell us what the time is? You do not need to show us how the clock works."

Whereas more certainty-oriented people like to give and receive detailed information in order to make sure everyone is prepared for different scenarios, risk-oriented people perceive this as too detailed and unnecessary, since they are willing to simply try it out and learn from experience.

However, people with a preference for avoiding uncertainty need a thorough foundation of information and a detailed plan before they feel comfortable enough to commit themselves. This might include an intensive and detailed analysis of the project and the consideration of a wide range of different aspects and points of view, along with strategic planning and thorough preparation in order to be able to deal with all eventualities. During the implementation phase the focus is on following the agreed plan rather than adjusting it on the go. Having a detailed and agreed plan is perceived as creating transparency for all stakeholders with regards to objectives. In addition, milestones are understood as anchors to help visualise the progress of the project whereas rules and regulations give orientation regarding the behaviour and actions expected from each participant.

The last dimension to consider is **monochronicity versus polychronicity**, which refers to conceptions of time, a dimension whose impact on working teams is often underestimated. Since organisations and societies have become increasingly obsessed with the speed of work and therefore time, it is clear that time and the way it is experienced differently must have an impact on workflow and satisfaction within teams. For this reason it is essential to include a time dimension in notions of diversity.

*"It bothers me when we run out of time. That’s why I like to start immediately after getting the task. Especially when we started our teamwork, one of my major personal needs was to clarify which member is responsible for keeping us on schedule and updating it with completed tasks so that we all have a kind of a structure which displays our progress and helps us to achieve our goals. My personal preference to get things done immediately and preferably be ready a few days prior to handing in the task also affects my course of action."*

Source: Learning journal, 2020

With regard to the dimension of time, an important differentiation can be made between monochronic and polychronic time orientations. This refers to whether a team member feels comfortable juggling several things at once and has a tendency to multitask, or prefers sequential scheduling and the accomplishment of tasks one after the other. The following is a good illustration of this and also highlights that being more monochronic or polychronic can be a cultural orientation but also relate to a specific context.

The work of a hairdresser illustrates the polychronic orientation nicely. Especially in smaller saloons hairdresser need to try to maximise their time. This is why they are likely to attend to several clients at a time. One may be having her hair coloured, while another sits under the dryer and yet another is sent to have her hair washed at the sink. In between, the hairdresser takes phone calls and notes down appointments. A mail courier, on the other hand, needs to behave quite differently as not many of his tasks can be intermeshed and he or she has to complete one transaction before moving on the next one.

Source: Ballard, Dawna I. and David R. Seibold 2003. Communicating and organizing in time. Management Communication Quarterly, 16 (3), pp. 387.

Closely linked to this is the question of flexibility with regard to work schedules and the understanding of punctuality and deadlines. The other aspect of time relates to the notion of events versus clock time. The event time orientation refers to viewing time as cyclical and a continuous flow, where tasks are planned relative to other tasks and activities take place in succession from the past to the present and into the future. This means that you ‘call it a day’ not at a specific time, but when the work that you felt needed to be finished is completed. Clock time in contrast works according to precise schedules and activities are anchored according to time. This also means that days are compartmentalised into activities, e.g. what happens after breakfast at a certain time, etc.

### Task: Opening hours

Look at the photograph below and think about when the shop is going to reopen and what somebody who is used to clearly defined opening hours would think about the shop owner.

Note down your thoughts in your learning journal.

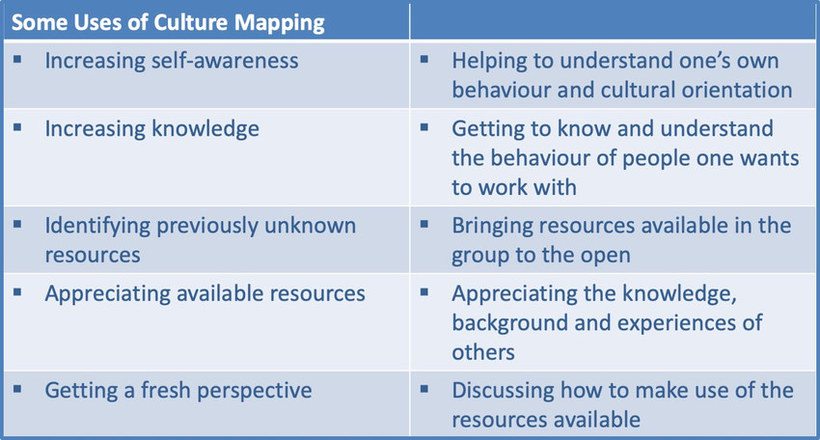


Source: Iken, Adelheid, 2002. The photo was taken in Shanghai, China.

Trying to understand our own orientation with regard to the various dimensions and assessing which type of behaviour we would typically display or expect in teamwork not only promotes self-awareness; It also helps to grasp other team members’ perspectives and understand the lens through which they see the world. It also helps to make the network of shared collectives among team members more transparent. In sum, mapping provides a basis with which similarities as well as differences can be detected. It fosters an understanding of possible communication issues as well as potentials for generating added value. Therefore, it contributes to the enhancement of team performance and effective interaction.

Many people question the importance of mapping and as Lane et al (2014) argue, there is a trade-off between investment and results. They acknowledge that mapping takes time but point out at the same time that it provides many opportunities for increased understanding, which may pay off at a later stage. The illustration below provides an overview of the benefits of mapping. When considering how much time to invest in the mapping process, criteria such as the degree of task complexity, team diversity and previous experience of diverse teams should be considered. Maps should be seen as flexible tools that can help us to understand our own as well as others' behaviour and may need adjustment depending on context.

The following table provides an overview of the advantages of mapping.



Mapping is a good and important starting point for bridging as it shows where relevant differences might be expected and where similarities exist. But mapping is useless unless it is accompanied by the willingness and openness of team members to accept that no one style and approach is better or worse than any other. When implemented well, mapping thus fosters understanding among group members and a positive approach to integration, which is the foundation for the next phase, bridging.

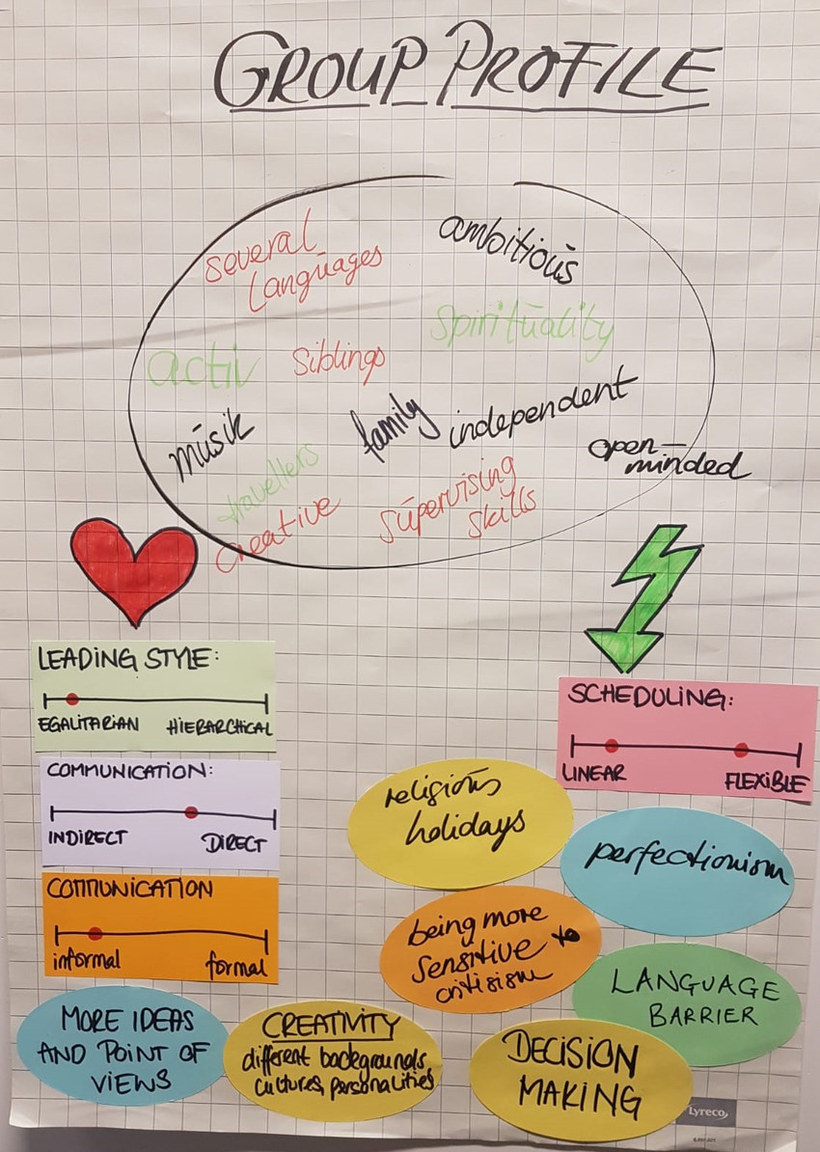
### Task: Getting to know myself and my cultural orientation

Knowing yourself is an important stepping stone if we want to perform well in an virtual intercultural team, and the dimensions discussed can be helpful in achieving this. Using the scales in your learning journal, imagine a work context and position yourself on a scale of one to five.

[](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/pictures/images/vit-5-3-table-cultural-orientations-large.jpg)

[Click on the image for a larger view](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/pictures/images/vit-5-3-table-cultural-orientations-large.jpg) (if necessary, hold down the Ctrl key)

Once a team has shared its identity profiles, the next step is to identify central differences and commonalities. This can be done by developing a group profile together. The one below indicates commonalities such as all team members' appreciation of a polite, semi-direct communication style. However, they have different approaches when it comes to scheduling and therefore time orientation. In addition, there are certain events such as religious holidays which are important to some team members.



Source: Iken, Adelheid, HAW Hamburg

Bridging could be considered the most important step, as it relates to what Lane et al (2019) call ‘Bridging differences through communication’. The starting point is to understand and interpret correctly what the other people mean by their words and behaviour including perceived differences as well as commonalities. Let us imagine, for example, that all team members share the understanding that they want to communicate openly. In this case we need to examine what they actually mean by ‘open communication’. Further, we should consider which areas this ‘open communication' refers to. So one of the major tasks is to develop a shared meaning in regard to the issues at stake.

In this context Lane et al (2019) refer to engaging, de-centering and re-centering as central skills in order to move through the bridging process. Engaging relates to an open attitude as well as how motivated participants are to put effort into overcoming communication barriers while believing that this is achievable. De-centering is understood as moving away from our own position and centering, i.e. trying to understand and see things through the eyes of the other person.

### Task: De-centering

On page 119 of their book "Organizational Behaviour" (2019), Lane and Maznevski quote a manager saying:

"I know that as a Chinese person it's hard for you to disagree openly with your boss, but I want you to know it's okay to do that with me. I don't mind when you disagree with me, in fact I expect you to."

Considering an open definition of culture, why can this not be considered de-centering? Note down your answer in your learning journal.

###### Sample answer

This is what a participant noted down:

The manager acknowledges possible behavioural differences but he expects the Chinese to behave in a way which, taken the expected behaviour into consideration, must be difficult and possibly even painful to do so. De-centering means more than acknowledging behavioural differences, it means taking an approach which generates the information needed in a way which caters for different communication styles, in this case that of the Chinese.

In the example provided, this may mean asking "What alternative viewpoints could you envisage?" or "How do you think others may perceive this?".

In the context of de-centering, it is extremely helpful to share explanations of behavioural patterns and do this without blaming or making assumptions. This helps to bridge communication differences without making pre-judgments and thus opens avenues for a creative exploration of alternatives. This is also the step of re-centering, i.e. finding a common view of the situation and agreeing on common rules. Bridging is an important step towards developing a shared reality and team culture.

Take a virtual meeting as an example. Initially, each team member might have different assumptions regarding issues such as the reason for coming together, who should be part of the meeting, the relevance of the informal and formal part of the meeting etc. The team therefore needs to develop a common understanding of meanings and based on this develop a commonly agreed approach. If a team does not take the time to clarify these questions, its members may use the same term for very different things. This in turn may result in misperceptions and misunderstandings. However, by going through the re-centering process the team is able to develop common meanings, in this case, with regard to ‘meeting’ and the rules and procedures linked to it. They may even reach the stage of developing new approaches with regard to ‘meetings’, for example.

### Task: The meaning of 'team meeting'

The following list specifies some possible meanings when referring to a ‘team meeting’. Think about what team meetings mean to you and how different meanings can influence your teamwork. Note down your thoughts in your learning journal.

A meeting can mean different things to different people, for example:

* a planned occasion
* a casual get-together to share work progress
* people getting together to discuss issues,
* meeting to enjoy sharing information
* people making decisions
* information gathering
* problem solving event

Integrating differences is the last step in the MBI approach. This stage involves benefitting from different perspectives and ideas and using these to create a high level of performance. Three key processes are of vital at this point: generating and ensuring participation, dealing with upcoming issues and building on all ideas available to the team. In the case of participation, it needs to be acknowledged that not every team member has the same norms with regard to contributing ideas and thoughts openly. There may be people who prefer to do this in a team meeting, others may prefer to do this in writing or in a one-to-one meeting, yet others find it easier if they are asked indirectly. Also the status of other team members may be a hindrance. There may be people who find it difficult to bring their ideas to the fore in front of the team leader. Therefore It might be advantageous to develop and agree on routines to facilitate and ensure everyone's participation – in other words, to develop a 'questioning' culture that everyone feels comfortable with.

## 5.4 Creating mutuality and negotiating culture in a virtual team

Now that the differences in the team are known and understood, the last phase is to manage them. Lane et al (2019) refer to this as integration. And this is where the production of culture takes place. Calling this step 'negotiating culture' or 'creating mutuality', underlines the fact that culture production does not just happen but is a process of indirect or direct negotiation. The following quote is testament to this:

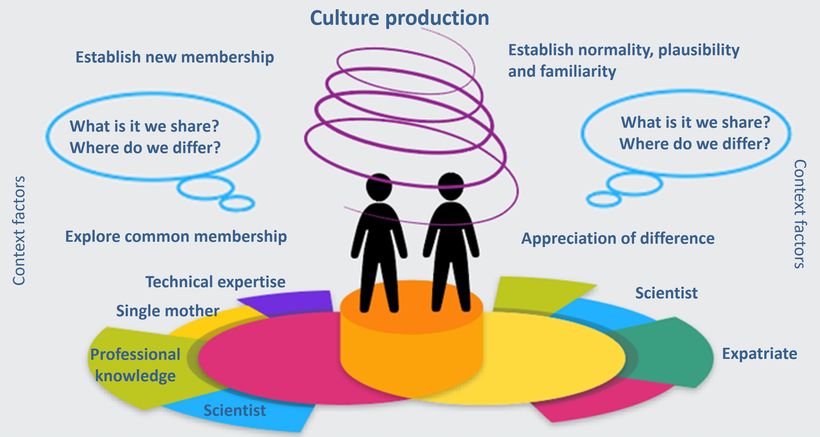
*"One of my team colleagues was never on time for our online meetings, which started to be really annoying. Once I asked her why and she told me that it is her understanding that being somewhat late is a sign of politeness. So, after some discussions about time and politeness we agreed that we would use the first ten minutes of our team meetings as social time so that everyone could join without being stressed out but that when I announce a meeting starting ‘at my time’ it is perceived as a matter of urgency to acknowledge clock time."*

Source: Learning journal, 2020

*Negotiating culture* needs to be understood as a process, whose particular outcomes are not known in advance and which is ideally based on dialogue, mutual respect and openness with the purpose of achieving a common goal. Negotiate is, as Brannen (1998, p. 12) argues "...used as a verb to encourage us to think of organizational phenomena as individual actors navigating through their work experience and orienting themselves to their work settings". What this quote brings out quite clearly is that the production of culture is an active process.

The term 'navigating' indicates that negotiations do not take place in a vacuum but that actors consciously or unconsciously take or are forced to take contextual determinants into account. These could be for example, the balance of power between team members and the organisation in which they work, the balance of power and influence among team members themselves, the a priori knowledge and experience of intercultural teamwork, the complexity of team relations and existing knowledge of cultural specifics. As Brannen and Salk (2000) argue, structural, situational and process related factors influence and affect the outcome of the negotiation process and thus what will be maintained, and what will be modified and blended in order to create specific situational work routines and practices.

The image below illustrates the process of 'culture production'. It shows membership of different collectives. Some of these are more relevant to teamwork than others. The illustration shows the influence of contextual factors on the negotiation process and the aim of creating mutuality and thus developing a team culture by establishing *normality*, *plausibility* and *familiarity*.



Source: Based on and inspired by Rathje, Stefanie (2015). Multicollectivity – It changes everything. Key Note Speech at the SIETAR Europe Congress ([SIETAR\_slides\_Rathje.pptx (stefanie-rathje.de)](http://stefanie-rathje.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/SIETAR_slides_Rathje.pdf). Accessed 24 May 2021.

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

When entering into the process of negotiating culture, there are basically five options. One would be to divide the tasks within a team in such a way that no adaptation is required. Or, one group might adapt to the other, meaning that one party modifies its behaviour. Alternatively, both groups could find a compromise, whereby both parties reduce their demands or change their approach in order to agree on procedures and meet mid-way. A further option would be for both parties to develop a completely novel approach and thus integrate new, effective and mutually acceptable rules and behaviours within the context of the team’s interactions. Such processes are commonly called a ‘third culture’, emphasising the fact that such a culture develops out of the interaction between two individuals with different cultural backgrounds.

### Task: A common path

*"At the very beginning it was quite hard to find and follow a common path. None of us wanted to move away from their position, but at the same time none had a proper idea, which made it so hard to put it all together. During this time, I recognised how important it is to take a step back, rethink my own position and open it up for others to join, move or discuss. Therefore, I involve myself in their areas of expertise to get a deeper idea about what was going on. When I did so, I was able to understand their point of view, saw connections and managed to readjust my position in order to achieve our goal."*

Source: Learning journal, 2020

Think about a situation in which you and others developed a novel approach to something.

The aim of *cultural production* and negotiation is the synchronisation of incompatible interaction routines. In other words it is the development of mutually agreed interaction routines that every team member feels comfortable with. This is based on an understanding of interculturality as a dynamic process involving the emergence and conscious development of a common culture. Based on the interplay of action, reaction and adaptation, negotiation is something which is always ongoing, but can also be initiated purposefully during the forming stage of the team development process.

## 5.5 Using cultural profiles as a basis for mapping and negotiating culture

### Task: My cultural profile

Imagine you are expected to work in a virtual intercultural and interdisciplinary team of three. Your boss is planning to invite you to an initial call where the team members can become acquainted. He asks you to develop a profile to help other team members get to know you. These profiles will be distributed to all team members so that you can use them to identify commonalities and differences. Because you know that the project is not only going to be challenging task-wise, but is likely to be so due to the diversity of the team members. You want to bring in your previous experiences and in particular you want to achieve a high level of cooperation and mutuality.

As a first task, develop your cultural profile. Your identity profile has four squares and covers issues such as:

* Who am I?
* What can I contribute?
* What have I experienced?
* What is important to me when working in a team?

As a first step you are asked to fill out the four quadrants of the cultural profile in your learning journal. In doing so, you can refer to the questions below as a general guide, from which you may choose relevant questions depending on time, the project itself and other factors. However, for the purpose of this exercise you only need to answer the questions which are highlighted.

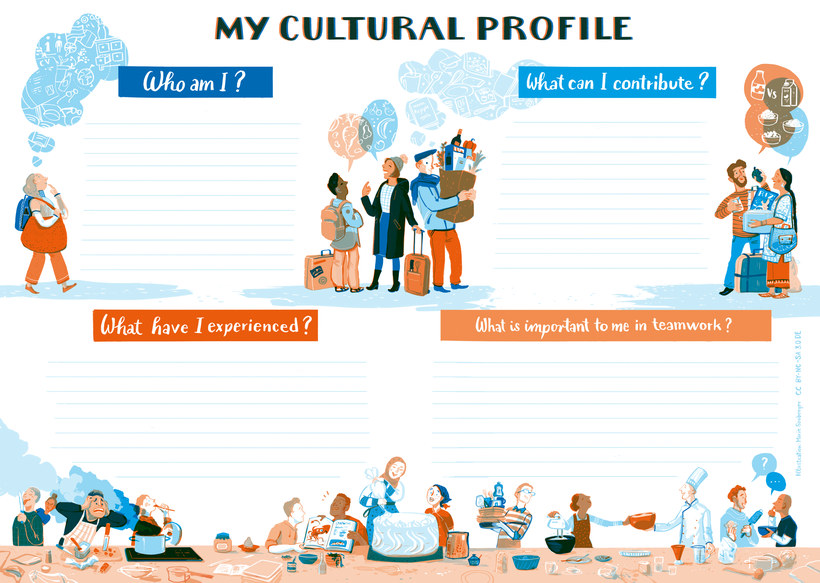
[](https://edubox.consilia-cct.com/pictures/images/vit-5-5-my-cultural-profile-high-res.jpg)

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

Who am I?

The answers should provide other team members with personal information that you are ready to share, and that would help them to get to know you better in a working context.

* What are central issues of your life path?
* What is your educational and professional background?
* How old are you?
* What is your marital status?
* What is your parental status?
* What are central collectives of which you are a member? (e.g. professional, leisure time)
* Which collectives had a big impact on you during your upbringing? (e.g. your family, sports club)
* For example, you may have been or are still a member of a sports club which influenced you because of the team spirit and friendships you developed and is still important to you because occasionally you occasionally still joining them for important matches.
* Which collectives are still very influential and powerful when you work with others? (e.g. your university, your family, sports club)

For example, the rituals and traditions in your family may still be very influential and you might, for example, be requested to be with your family on specific occasions, which influences your work calendar.

* Which contextual factors have had a major influence on you and in which way? (e.g. the local church)
* Which contextual issues are still influential when you work with others? (e.g. behaviour I learned at grammar school)

What can I contribute?

This quadrant includes information about experiences and competencies you have, which might be beneficial to achieving the team’s goals and contributing to team satisfaction. Questions that might help you to identify these are:

* Which languages do you speak and at what level?
* Which competencies are you able to contribute, including media skills and knowledge, self-management and efficacy, intercultural competence and team-related competencies?

What have I experienced?

This quadrant refers to experiences you have with regard to teamwork and virtual teamwork in particular. The following questions may guide you in this.

* What motivates you when working with others?
* What irritates you when working with others?
* What drives you crazy?
* What are your trigger points?
* Where have you felt excluded?
* With which groups of people can you easily establish relationships?

What is important to me when working in a team?

* What are your expectations?
* How would you like others to behave when working in a team with you? Consider dimensions such as "independence versus interdependence", "task versus relationship", "egalitarian versus status", "direct versus indirect", "risk versus certainty" and "monchronicity vesus polychronicty"?
* How is your self-image with regard to these dimensions?

This is Natalia's profile:

Who am I?

I am 30 and I am an experienced female professional in the sphere of languages. My core value is communication. I already possess two degrees and now I am pursuing a new program to extend my hard skills and develop soft skills. Currently I live alone in a foreign country which I moved to last year. Every day since I arrived I face linguistic and intercultural challenges on both private and public levels. My newly acquired intercultural competences help me a lot. One of the key things here is not to forget who I am and where I am from.

Everyone belongs to different collectives and I am not an exception. Collectives I can attribute myself to include: my family in Russia, students, students of HS Fulda, friends who live in Russia, friends who live in Germany, foreigners from Russia in Germany, women, women aged 30, linguists, Fulda residents.

My family, my school and my friends had the most profound impact on me during my upbringing.

I believe that during my upbringing I was strongly influenced by my school community, because English was taught at the school right from the first year and this helped to shape my career choices later on. So my school community influenced my my job choices but also my way of working. It was there that I first started speaking in front of an audience, and I became really passionate about it.

What do I bring with me?

My cultural backpack includes my Russian origin, knowledge of English and German. I have been to 17 countries and have always worked in intercultural teams. Recently I started becoming involved in virtual teamwork for diverse projects. Here I understood that working on remote projects is much more difficult because it requires a higher degree of commitment and stricter self-management. Anyway, I believe that I am a a very conscientious team member who always adheres to rules and shows a high level of responsibility. When I work in a team I contribute professional knowledge, commitment, responsiveness, MS Office skills and intercultural competencies.

What have I experienced?

The feeling of togetherness motivates me to work with others, especially when I understand that there is something important that unites me with the team. Miscommunication irritates me in teamwork, so for example when team members are reluctant to speak out. I am motivated to achieve results, especially when I enjoy the topic of the project. My trigger points revolve around the nature of the project, because I can’t work on something that I have no interest in. I feel excluded when I don’t feel updated on the progress of the project and when I don’t have a particular field of responsibility. I am a very easy-going and friendly person, and I feel comfortable with people who share the same feelings with team members.

What is important to me when working in a team?

One of the most important aspects is to be tolerant and understand each other’s differences and uniqueness. Always being able to listen to each other makes the project smooth and seamless.

As far as dimensions are concerned, I would prefer the following:

* Interdependence – makes you feel like you are working in a team;
* Task – any effort should be attached to a goal;
* Status – every team should have a leader;
* Direct – having to read between the lines causes stress for me;
* Certainty – a level of risk is unavoidable, but being more certainty-oriented can bring more stability;
* Monochronicity - deadlines and plans help to achieve goals and lead to better results.

This is Hoang’s profile:

Who am I?

I have a Masters degree in International Business and Cultural Studies and have been working for the past 15 years as a facilitator and consultant for cross-cultural collaboration.

My collectives are first and foremost my direct family with my wife and our three children. I am also a son of parents who originated in China. As I have lived and worked there for many years, many of my friends are also based there. I also am part of several networks of intercultural collaboration, and engaged in non-profit groups who strive to make our society more sustainable on many levels. As a student, I was engaged in a student organization which promotes international exchange. I still am involved here as alumni. These are also the collectives that have shaped me professionally. The student organization gave me the chance to meet and work with people of countries across the globe, and there I already worked as a facilitator. Growing up in Germany, I was heavily influenced by having the ideas of a multitude of worldviews and values from childhood on.

What can I contribute?

I speak native German, and fluent English and Mandarin Chinese. I also speak a Chinese dialect that is rather seldomly used in business context. I am a trained moderator and mediator, as well as trainer and consultant. I have worked as a General Manager and as Freelancer for many years, which enabled me to work in highly independent manner, but I also work well in a team. I consider myself to be creative, and believe myself to be a good listener and motivator of others. I am also highly experienced at working with several virtual collaboration tools.

What have I experienced?

I feel motivated when trying out new things. I love it when the work of the team meshes together, and contributes to something positive at the end. I also like it when there is a positive atmosphere in the team, and the team members also connect on a human level. However, I am also motivated when things get "to the point", and there is no time wasted on needless discussions- so for example on small technicalities. I also do not like it when responsibilities and structures are unclear to me.

What is important to me when working in a team?

Working as a promoter of diversity for my entire working life, it is important for me to see differences as an asset for the team. I prefer working rather independently, but I also do not mind working with an interdependent team culture. I believe that having a good relationship with your colleagues helps avoid misunderstandings, and the team should invest some time getting to know each other. I believe that because of my upbringing I prefer to have clear leadership structures in a team. I enjoy working as equals with my teammates, but it should be clear how decisions are made. I believe that in today´s volatile market situations, flexibility is more important than planning. Some planning is advisable, but rules and processes should generally serve an objective.

I prefer working monochonically, but do not mind working on several different projects at a time, as long as there are certain time slots for them. I also believe that sometimes it can be more productive to work on several tasks at once.

I prefer a clear language within communication, but believe that it is important to also take the feelings of others into account.

### Task: Commonalities and differences among team members

Comparing your own profile with the profiles of Natalia and Hoang, use the common triangle (figure below) and highlight commonalities as well as differences.

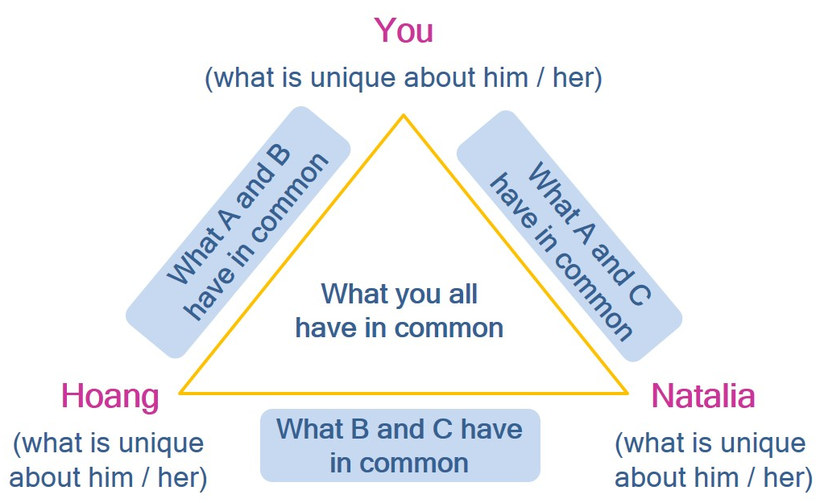


Figure developed by Thu Phuong Vuong for this course

### Task: Reconciling differences

How would you go about dealing with differences following the MBI-approach?  
Choose two examples and go through the MBI process considering differences and commonalities between the three of you.

As an example, let us consider the differences and commonalities between Hoang and Natalia, referring to their profiles, and see how we could start the process of negotiating culture here.

First of all, we might assess their answers to "What is important to me when working in a team?"

Our comparison shows that Hoang and Natalia have certain common areas:

* Both value tolerance of diversity within the team
* As Natalia believes that listening to each other is important, Hoang mentioned that he believes himself to be a good listener.
* In terms of status, both believe that it is positive to have a clear leadership structure in the team
* Both team members prefer working in a monochronic way

What are the differences in desired working styles?

* Natalia prefers interdependent work, whereas Hoang rather prefers to work independently
* Natalia seems to be more task-oriented, whereas relationships are important within the team for Hoang
* While Natalia strives for more certainty in the collaboration, Hoang believes in a more flexible approach
* In terms of communication, Natalia prefers a direct communication approach, whereas the relationship aspect is also important for Hoang when communicating

We can see that some of the starkest differences relate to the certainty vs. risk orientation and the task vs. relationship aspect. According to Hoang's profile he only has a slight preference for independent work and can also imagine himself working in an interdependent manner. Hoang also mentions that direct communication works for him as long as it is not offensive.

As both believe in diversity as an asset, and seem to be open-minded for each other´s point of view, it might be better to apply the "third culture approach", and negotiate a working style with which both feel comfortable

One way to do this would be to discuss these points as examples:

1. What kind of communication would Hoang find offensive? What could be some examples? When could the indirect communication style lead to misunderstandings in Natalia’s point of view? Is there a style they can agree on?
2. Where do both view their personal benefits within certainty or risk orientation, respectively? In which scenarios would which style be more helpful? It might be possible to agree on different working styles in specific situations. They could for example agree that in times of emergencies, a risk-oriented approach would be more appropriate, whereas when it comes to long-term strategies, more time should be invested in the planning processes within a certainty-oriented approach.
3. Why is it more important for Hoang to be relationship-oriented at work? Why is Natalia rather task-focussed? What could be the benefits for them? As in the case above, the idea would be to see how we can come to a common consensus. It is also possible that Natalia would say "I don’t mind getting to know my colleagues on a personal level as well, as long as the task is not neglected". This would make sure that Natalia and Huong have both benefits in mind when they work as a team.

Instead of looking for a third culture, it is certainly also possible for Hoang and Natalia to work on their individual work assignments in order to avoid friction. However, we can see in this example that by looking for common ground, we have the potential to find a working style that might be much more beneficial for team success.

In the session "Negotiating an E-culture for my team" you will explore some tools which will help you understand how integration and cultural negotiation can be put into practice and use the results in order to develop a virtual team culture.

## 5.6 Summary

Teams are not homogeneous and differences among members are likely to stem from their memberships of different collectives and cultures. It has become commonplace to hear phrases such as "be open-minded" and "we need to appreciate diversity" when approaching challenges of diversity. However, working well in virtual teams means more than this, and requires us to use well thought-out approaches in order to bridge and integrate differences, thereby enabling the team to work effectively. The MBI approach, which recommends the stages mapping, bridging and integrating, helps us to achieve this. The mapping step acts as a tool to highlight commonalities and differences of a team, while reflecting more on one’s own cultural profile. Bridging and integrating enables us to discover options available to us in our endeavour to negotiate an inclusive, high-performing team-culture.

## 5.7 Learning review

### Task: Learnings from this session

Look back at the results of your cultural profile and the process of creating mutuality in virtual teams and note down three major learnings in your learning journal.

## 5.8 Sources, further reading and web links

#### Sources

* Ballard, D. I., & Seibold, D. R. (2003). Communicating and organizing in time. Management Communication Quarterly, 16 (3), pp. 387.
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* Gardenswartz, L., Rowe, A. (2003). Diverse teams at work. Capitalizing on the power of diversity. Alexandria: SHRM
* Lane, H. W., Maznevski, M. L., & DiStefano, J. J. (2019). International management behavior. Global and sustainable leadership. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### Weblinks

* Under the following link you will find an interview with Ernest Antoine (Leadership Strategies) on MBI in practice: "Building cross cultural team through MBI technique":  
  <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rSj7hngIZY> (accessed on 17.11.2020)