

A Qualitative Examination of Virtual Leadership in Multinational Teams

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Leadership for Virtual Multinational Teams



Research Question

What leadership behaviors are viewed as effective *specific to* virtual, multinational teams?

- Focus on follower sensemaking and meaning-making



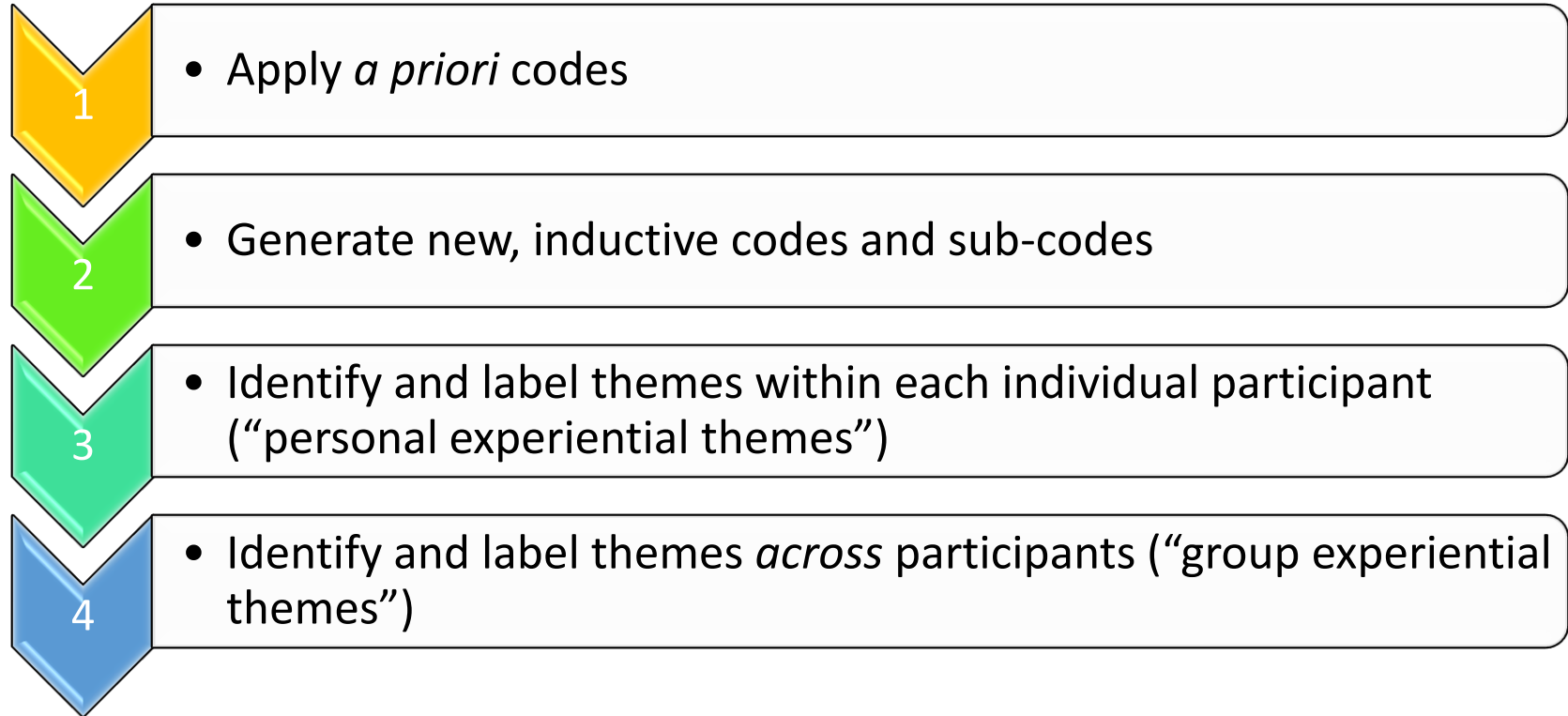
Method Overview

- **Approach: Interpretive Phenomenology (qualitative)**
 - Focus on **sensemaking** of individuals in context.
 - **Purposive sampling** & semi-structured interviews.
 - **Depth** over breadth (typically small sample sizes).
 - Analysis incorporates researcher **interpretations** of participants' stories to ascertain meanings.

Participants

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Country of Origin	Industry	Location of multinational team members
Sally	White, Caucasian	F	Turkiye	Technology, Financial Services	India, UK, Ireland, Australia
Emre	White, Caucasian	M	Turkiye	Technology, Financial Services	India, Belgium, Ireland, UK
Frank	White, Caucasian	M	US	Technology, Financial Services	India, Australia, UK
Maria	White, Caucasian	F	US	Risk & Compliance	India
George	White, Caucasian	M	US	Consumer Products (Marketing)	Spain, Latin/South America (various), India
Ryan	White, Caucasian	M	UK	Professional Services	India
Brian	White, Caucasian	M	US	Medical systems	India, Japan, Australia
Mark	White, Caucasian	M	US	Medical systems	India, Malaysia

Analysis Procedure



Results Overview: Major Theme + Two Sub-Themes

Overall Theme:
Multicultural Mindset



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Sub - Theme:
Making Implicit Assumptions Explicit



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Sub - Theme:
Creating Inclusion Through Time Zone Management



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Overall Theme: Multicultural Mindset



Overall Theme: Effective Leaders Proactively Develop *and Demonstrate* a Multicultural Mindset

- **Proactively pursue** relevant cultural knowledge.
- **Understand** the types of things that can vary across cultures.
- **Demonstrate cultural knowledge** (if not demonstrated, it is assumed the knowledge does not exist).



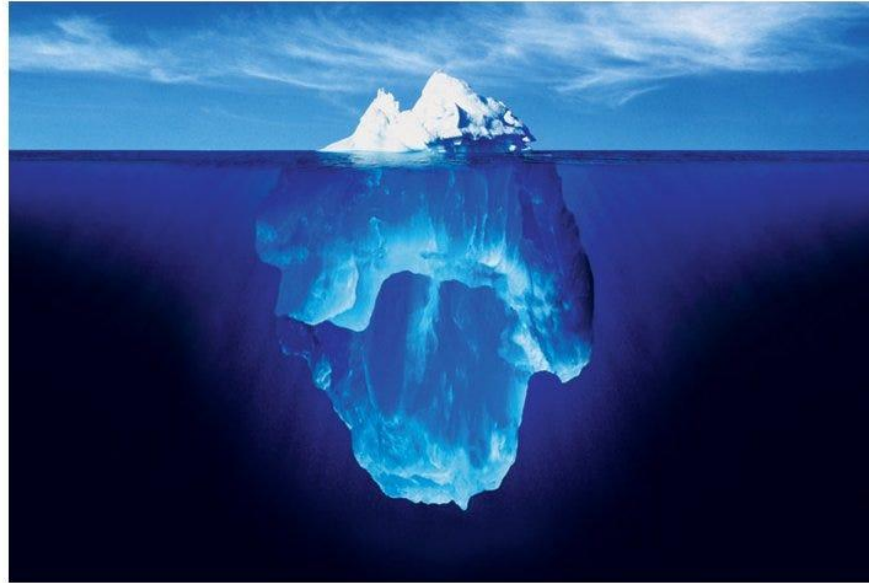
Theme: Effective Leaders Develop *and Demonstrate* a Multicultural Mindset

“The ones who manage it the best in a virtual environment are ones that have a lot of international experience themselves... international experiences where **they're aware that there are tremendously different cultures.**”

(Brian)

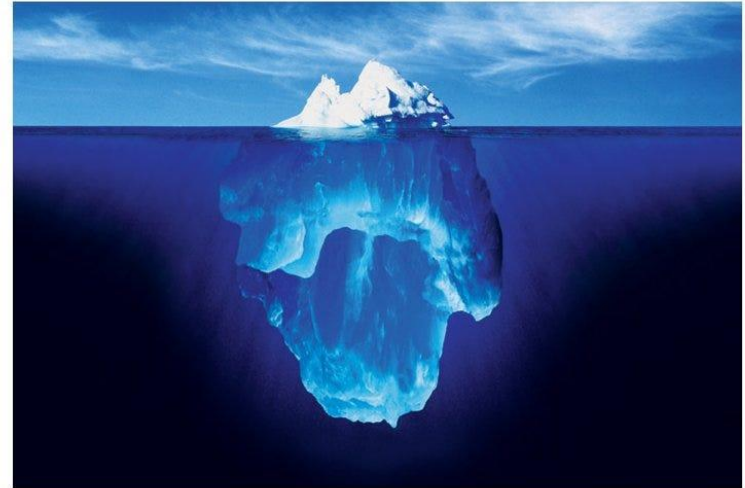
“You need to **pay attention** to news. You need to look at this, actually **use your company's HR directory** to see is actually what national holidays are there? What's going on in this part of the world? You need to **pay attention** to that.” (Emre)

Sub - Theme: Making Implicit Assumptions Explicit



Sub-Theme 1: Effective Leaders Guide Communication, Coordination, and Sensemaking by Making the Implicit Explicit

- Implicit cultural variations in communication, time horizon, workflow practices, etc.
- Leaders help **make these implicit assumptions explicit**, thereby allowing more effective **expectation-setting**.



Sub-Theme 1: Effective Leaders Guide Communication, Coordination, and Sensemaking by Making the Implicit Explicit

You might have different cultures just in terms of expectations...**What is the expectation of the response?** And what I've found is the more successful teams...have had that clarity of when, not only who's responsible for what, but **what would be the expectation of when things are expected**, because those are great conversations to have up front because then you can address possible heartburn situations.
(George)

Sub-Theme 1: Effective Leaders Guide Communication, Coordination, and Sensemaking by Making the Implicit Explicit

And so one thing is that we do much differently than they do in Japan. They show tremendous amounts of respect constantly throughout an interaction with individuals. Whereas **[in] the US, we're very quick to the point which is not [shakes his head no] perceived well** throughout most of Asia, but specifically, Japan. So **being aware [and] just showing respect throughout [the conversation]**. (Brian)

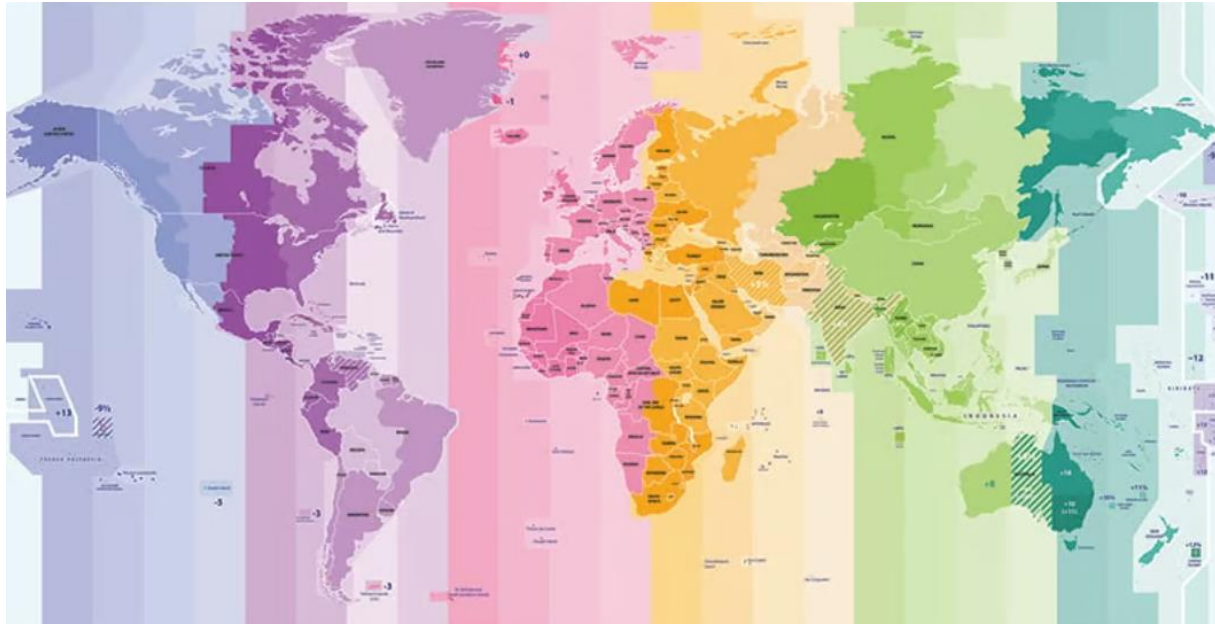
Sub-Theme 1: Effective Leaders Guide Communication, Coordination, and Sensemaking by Making the Implicit Explicit

Guiding follower sense-making and interpretation in cultural contexts:

I'm not going to name the country, and they're so direct they can just tell you, is actually, "Hey, this is awful." But in United States, usually, we say, "Oh, this is great but..." we list 10 different things. So...when we say "this is horrible", is just basically kind of like **heartbreaking for some people.** (Emre)

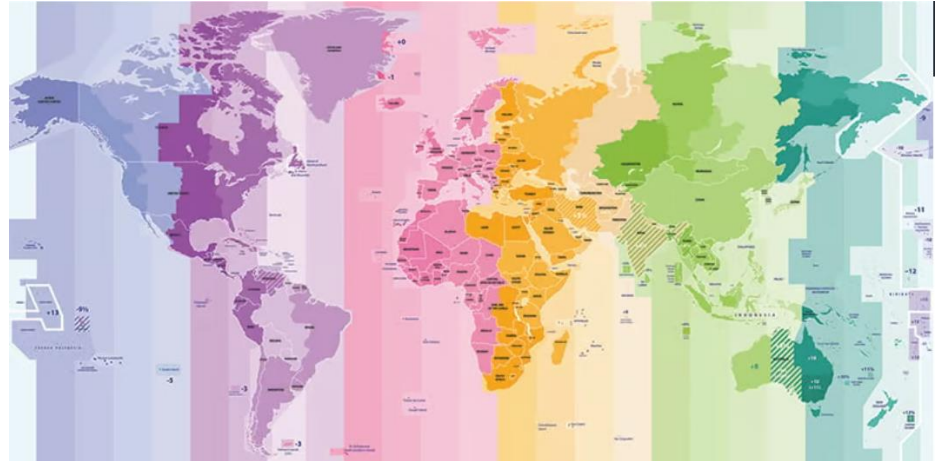
But I had to **keep reminding them that that was just a cultural thing.** And that's just **what they're used to** is asking the male for questions or advice. (Mark)

Sub - Theme: Creating Inclusion Through Time Zone Management



Sub-Theme 2: Effective Leaders Create Inclusion by Successfully Managing Time Zone Differences

- Time zone issues were highly salient.
- Consideration of one's time zone (or lack of thereof) is **interpreted as a *signal* of one's worth**, respect, or value on the team.



Sub-Theme 2: Effective Leaders Create Inclusion by Successfully Managing Time Zone Differences

For example, like we were having like 2 meetings weekly. And we were just doing one in US time and one is basically India time. So it's actually, **we can accommodate everyone, because I don't want people to actually feel like less value just because they are living in a different time zone.** (Emre)

Sub-Theme 2: Effective Leaders Create Inclusion by Successfully Managing Time Zone Differences

So what ends up happening is we **leverage the time zone differences**, meaning like he would send me something you know, at the end of his day it will be noon for me so, or whatever, so I can work the entire afternoon or evening, send it to him, and then in his morning hours he would review and come back. And I saw a similar approach from some of my other peers who had like similar relationships. So that kind of collaboration worked really well rather than you know, being in the time zone being under same time. **The business day was longer, so the handovers and everything we were able to make it work.** (Sally)

Discussion - Contributions

- As virtual multinational teams become more prevalent, there is increasing demand for knowledge on how to engage in virtual leadership in this context.
- **Theoretical contribution:** multicultural mindset as a *potential* extension of Bell et al.'s (2023) leader functions taxonomy (specific to multinational virtual contexts).
 - However, it may overlap substantially with some existing functions:
 - Sensemaking
 - Supporting the social climate
 - Facilitating the use of technology

Discussion - Contributions

- Absence of *demonstrated* multicultural mindset not interpreted as neutral; it is interpreted as disrespectful.
- Time zone issues are so salient because they are interpreted as a signal about one's value.
- Participants' stories demonstrated some practical applications such as ways of building multicultural mindset (through travel, news, and availability of cultural information through centralized systems) and ways of successfully managing time zone issues.

Potential Limitations and Future Research

- Small sample size and only participants in US; will these results generalize?
- Based on opinion and sensemaking; will correlations support these relationships?
- What moderator variables such as perceived leader authenticity may influence these results?





Thank you!

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