From the Perspectives Editor

Anna Tavis, Perspectives Editor

We are virtual citizens in today's world. We meet, relate, communicate, do business and create our identity online. If a big part of our business lives is spent online, why aren't we as effective as we could be in translating our business interactions across time zones, cultures and virtual worlds? After all, isn't technology here to stay and isn't globalization relentless?

Yael Zofi has an answer to this 21st century challenge. The founder, CEO and lead consultant of AIM Strategies, Zofi espouses a simple model that works. It is the LEARN model: **L**isten, **E**ffectively Communicate, **A**void Ambiguity, **R**espect Differences and **N**o Judgment. HR's role is to help teams bridge cultural divide and to help shrink the virtual gap and create community, teamwork, mutual respect and understanding.

Several individuals respond to Zofi's LEARN model. Steve Schloss heads global human resources for LivePerson Inc. LivePerson's focus on coaching, among peers and leaders at all levels and at all global locations, creates the foundation of meaningful connections and accountability.

Kevan Hall, the CEO of Global Integration, attributes success of high-performing virtual teams to their adoption of some shared explicit behaviors and mechanisms, such as not to take silence for an agreement.

Rich Lepsinger, president of OnPoint Consulting, adds to Zofi's LEARN model 10 additional tips on virtual team effectiveness.

David Rock, founder of Neuroleadership Institute, concludes: "In a virtual environment where there are less smiles and pleasant faces to dampen our natural threat response, we have to work even harder to ensure that everyone on the same team actually treats each other as truly on the same team."

This *Perspectives* is about practical, hands-on solutions to the daily challenges of virtual teaming, and it is an important read for all HR colleagues.

Why Cross-Cultural Communication is Critical to Virtual Teams and How to Overcome the Intercultural Disconnect

By Yael Zofi, CEO, AIM Strategies

With technology and globalization shrinking the workplace, virtual teams are on the rise. More than ever, people from various backgrounds and cultures increasingly work together, so virtual colleagues need a high comfort level with cultures other than their own. The ability to communicate with and manage people from other cultures is no longer an option; it is a requirement for success.

At its most basic, culture refers to a group or community whose members share similar experiences, worldviews and values. When engaging cross-culturally, virtual managers need to recognize cultural characteristics and understand how to communicate in a way that prevents differences from derailing work projects.

In work situations, differences in interpreting context may cause friction or intercultural disconnects. In some cultures (low-context), words alone convey one's intention, while in other cultures (high-context), the context and interpretation of the message provides cues that are just as important as the words. For example, a businessman from India (a high-context culture) may say "yes" when asked if he agrees to a plan, but, in reality, he is merely conveying that he understands the plan, not that he is ready to work on it.

I'd like to share a story that one of my clients, a virtual leader at a global technology company, told me about an intercultural disconnect that occurred when her team was charged with creating a marketing plan across different locations and cultures.

I did in-person and virtual interviews with folks in the Asia/Pacific region and found out that in many oriental cultures there simply isn't a word for "no." The survey was designed with "yes/no" answers, and we didn't realize that the resulting data was skewed. Everyone answered "yes," and it took us a while to realize that. At a meeting with senior executives, the translator answered my questions "yes," but I could see them shake their heads "no." Their body language also said "no." It hadn't occurred to me that they were saying "yes" but not meaning it until I saw it with my own eyes. At that point, we redid the survey using only multichoice questions. If I hadn't gone to Singapore and Tokyo,

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I wouldn't have noticed this cultural disconnect.[1]

Many virtual managers, facing similar issues, have learned to put in place solutions that are based on common sense and positive intent. Through extensive research with virtual teams, I found five cross-cultural communication strategies that helped them overcome the intercultural disconnect. These can be easily remembered by the acronym LEARN.[2]

Strategy 1: Listen

Active listening is the most useful way to overcome communication barriers. Communicating across cultures adds another layer to the "noise" that is present, which makes it critical to add that extra step of checking back. Ask questions often to ensure that you accurately understand the message being conveyed and paraphrase back to the speaker to clarify understanding.

Strategy 2: Effectively Communicate

Virtual teams rely heavily on written email communication or phone calls, so they need to compensate for the lack of visual cues. Based on my research, trust did not always require face-to-face communication as long as there was regular contact.[3]

The aim is to keep communication lines open and transparent so that when conflicts arise — and they will — a resolution is found quickly. Here is a four-step technique to keep communication lines open:

1. When you sense difficulty, respond with appropriate words that will not inflame a situation.
2. Deliver balanced feedback.
3. Build on an idea.
4. Give credit/positive reinforcement.

Strategy 3: Avoid Ambiguity

The ability to avoid ambiguity is directly tied to active listening. Tolerating ambiguity doesn't necessarily mean you deliberately avoid these situations. Rather, it means you approach new, different and potentially unpredictable situations without the uneasiness that can frustrate you and hinder your ability to communicate.

These suggestions can help build a virtual environment that avoids ambiguity:

- Create a safe, friendly environment that encourages participation, especially during conference calls.
- Share information about team members' cultural backgrounds.
- Recognize your own assumptions and prejudgments that may be clouded by past experiences and subconscious bias.
- Build in feedback loops to ensure clarity.

Strategy 4: Respect Differences

Just as you want to be respected for different characteristics that you bring to a group, others do as well. Following these guidelines should lead to positive results:

- Make it your business to learn at least one fact about every team member's culture.
- Acknowledge cultural differences and remind teammates to respect them.
- Be punctual when meeting someone new from an unfamiliar culture.
- Do not overgeneralize or attribute characteristics of a given culture to individuals; refrain from stereotyping even when others around you do it.
- Demonstrate flexibility and openness to discussing other options. If you and your colleague want different things, try to find a middle ground and compromise.

- Learn to use the phrases "please" and "thank you" in the individual's native tongue.

Strategy 5: No Judgment

Respecting others means suspending judgment. Try this simple three-part evaluation approach:

1. **Describe** – Describe a situation that causes concern: e.g., a team member consistently joins a regular Monday morning conference call late.

2. **Interpret** – Before rushing to judgment — "Joe joins the calls late because he doesn't care about his this project" — consider several possible reasons for Joe's behavior:

- Familial obligations
- A start-of-week meeting with his boss always runs late
- Lack of commitment to the job

Now you can interpret his behavior: "Joe's tardiness could result from something out of his control."

3. **Evaluate** – By taking a more objective approach, such as "I'll talk to Joe and find out why he's always late on the call," you will arrive at the truth and turn the situation around.

When virtual team members bring cultural disconnects into the workplace, help them bridge the cultural gap by applying these practical, behavior-focused strategies. Multicultural organizations are here to stay, and the virtual teams that reflect this reality can enrich them — provided that members work cohesively to achieve success.

Yael Sara Zofi is the founder and CEO of AIM Strategies®, Applied Innovative Management®. For more than 20 years she has applied behavioral science techniques to organizations and teams and has dedicated her efforts to improving productivity in the areas of global leadership development, virtual team effectiveness and cross-cultural communications.

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[1] Zofi, Yael S. (2012). *A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams*, AMACOM: New York City, page 204.

[2] Whicker, Marcia Lynn and Sigelman, Lee (1991). *Computer simulation applications, an introduction*. Sage Publications: London.

[3] Senge, P. M. and Lannon, C. (1997). Managerial Microworlds. *Technology Review*, Vol. 93, Issue 5, 62-68.

Listening is the Most Powerful Connection-Building Tool

By Steve Schloss

Upon reading Yael Zofi's article, I wondered about my own issues with connection, especially as an active social network user. Do meaningful and personal connections truly exist in a virtual world, especially as each of us defines "connection" quite differently?

On a recent visit to one of our international locations, I participated in a regularly scheduled meeting of company leaders, by video and audio, across multiple time zones. As the meeting unfolded, it was apparent that several of the LEARN elements that Zofi identified in her article were surely missing. The No. 1 infraction was the lack of active listening. However, this was not a function of cultural difference, a lack of respect, or language and syntax problems; this was a case of distraction. As I surveyed the conference room, not a single person was fully engaged. I suspect the same could be said for every other unseen participant. The meeting was unproductive, and it seemed that we had our tethered technology lifestyles to thank for it.

Zofi's article reminds me of "Robert's Rules of Order," published in the far less complicated word of 1915. One hundred years later, Zofi's simple LEARN model serves as a modern reminder of the same. As we become the most connected society in history, we still find ourselves challenged by perpetual and global misunderstanding. The reduced reliance and often reduced interest for face-to-face interaction appears to result in a lack of personal and meaningful connection. A lack of connection leads to mistrust and dysfunction. Text messaging (with others and among group members) during meetings of any type undermines the ability to lead, align and create open dialogue. The comments section for any *New York Times* article proves that opinions and attitudes of people, via keyboard, are usually amplified thanks to their anonymous delivery. It becomes easy to judge from afar without implications. Leading a virtual team requires enormous patience and a commitment to proactively create team agreements that support accountability and candor between members.

In today's business environment, the term "virtual team" is redundant and business-as-usual for any global organization. Humans have a basic need to connect in meaningful ways and to feel a sense of mutual trust. We cannot allow our electronic devices to influence basic values.

At LivePerson Inc., we place tremendous value on connection; we enable our employees, from all corners of the world, to connect face to face when it makes the most sense and when there is a true business and human need. We understand there is a cost to this, but we see real results, so it is a price we willingly pay. New employees, regardless of where they sit globally, come together for a connection-driven, weeklong onboarding experience. Our company's focus on coaching — among peers and leaders of all levels — serves as a foundation for meaningful connection and accountability.

As distractions grow, our ability to listen and be listened to suffers and feeds into the mania of misunderstanding. Listening has always been, and will remain, the most powerful connection-building tool — even in our world of perpetually tethered technology.

Steve Schloss is the senior vice president and head of global human resources for LivePerson Inc., the leading cloud-based platform company that enables more than 8,500 companies to proactively connect and intelligently engage in real time with their customers via chat, voice and content deliver at the right time and through the right channel, including websites, social media and mobile devices.

Culture is Always Half about Them and Half about Us

By Kevan Hall

Yael Zofi offers some great tips on cross-cultural communication. Culture is often described as an onion — with an outer layer (the explicit) covering an inner layer of meaning.

One of the challenges in cross-cultural communication is that we observe specific behavior, such as a gesture or facial expression, and our subconscious attempts to "read" and attribute meaning to the observation. With nonverbal communication, we do this instinctively. Unfortunately, we tend to do it by attributing the meaning that that behavior would have had in our own culture.

When we see a smile, we interpret it as amusement; in another culture, it may be a sign of embarrassment. When we make observations about another culture, they are always half about them and half about us. If we see another culture as emotionally expressive, it probably means we come from a culture that is more emotionally repressed. (I speak as an Englishman, so I know what I am talking about.)

We see a lot of cross-cultural errors caused by mistakenly attributing meaning to an observation. For example, a group of young European graduates recently assumed an Arabic female colleague was unfriendly because she didn't shake hands when, in fact, this was because it was inappropriate to have male and female physical contact in her culture. The question I often use when people make these observations — for example, "She is unfriendly" — is to ask, "What is it that she does that makes you think that?" And then, "What other factors might cause that behavior apart from unfriendliness?" A little awareness training can be extremely helpful.

In some ways, communicating through technology can help. For example, we learn to be more explicit and direct on conference calls, and people who have a more limited capability in the common language often prefer written communication such as email because it allows them more time to check the vocabulary and think about a response.

However, working through technology robs us of a lot of nonverbal communication and can undermine trust through misunderstandings.

Because of this, successful virtual teams tend to adopt some shared explicit behaviors and mechanisms. For example, silence cannot indicate consent on a conference call. Because you cannot really read expressions and identify levels of commitment, you need some mechanism for making this explicit — for example, by polling each individual, asking them to commit formally to what they're going to do.

One way I do this is to ask each individual to summarize whether they agree and what they will do as a result of this decision. It is important to listen carefully to the answers; any evasion or indirectness in the answer shows a lack of real commitment to the implementation of the decision. Sometimes I ask people in webinars to type in the number in a poll between one and 10 that indicates their agreement to implement the decision immediately. If anyone scores below seven, I don't take this as a decision that has really been made.

Kevan Hall is the CEO of Global Integration, specialists in matrix management, virtual teams and global working. He trains his clients through his method of *Speed Lead: Faster, Simpler Ways to Manage People, Projects and Teams in Complex Companies* and he consults with major multinationals around the world.

The Virtual Challenge: It's More Than Cultural Differences

By Richard Lepsinger

As Yael Zofi observes, virtual teamwork is on the rise, which creates a variety of challenges for team members and leaders. As virtual teams cross time zones, communication and coordination become much more difficult. While cross-cultural issues impact communication and collaboration in a virtual setting, they are just one hurdle that virtual teams face.

A study conducted by our firm, OnPoint Consulting, found that more than 25 percent of virtual teams were not fully performing. But why is that the case? We believe there are three characteristics of working in a virtual setting that impact the ability of employees and team leaders to "just do what they've always done."

First, the lack of face-to-face contact makes it more difficult to build personal relationships and establish trust. A great deal of the knowledge we have about people and their values is gained through spontaneous, informal interactions during a coffee break, lunch or through informal breaks when we visit with people to chat. Unfortunately, that type of spontaneous informal interaction is absent in a virtual setting and can be difficult to replicate.

Technology, the second characteristic, has been a significant catalyst for virtual teams, but it creates challenges of its own. No matter how "rich" the technology is, it is not as rich or natural as face-to-face communication because a lot of information is lost in a virtual setting.

One advantage of virtual teams is that organizations can leverage the best talent regardless of their location. Different time zones, the third characteristic, make it more difficult to collaborate and to involve people in decisions that affect them. It also makes scheduling team virtual meetings difficult (someone has to get up early or stay up late) and inhibits spontaneous interactions.

The challenge for virtual leaders and teams is to use technology and a shift in their behavior and habits to bridge this "virtual gap" and diminish the impact distance has on collaboration and communication. Examples of actions used by the most effective virtual leaders and teams in our study to close the virtual gap include:

Successful virtual teams adopt shared explicit behaviors.

- Meet face-to-face at least once early on in the team's formation to build relationships and learn about team members' capabilities.

- Use tools such as an electronic team page and bulletin boards to create a sense of shared space.

- Find a comfortable midpoint for information sharing and decision making that accommodates the cultures represented on the team.

- Partner team members at different locations and rotate these periodically.

- Leverage synchronous tools (e.g., instant messaging) to increase spontaneous communication.

- Choose communication technologies that are most appropriate to the task (e.g., email for information sharing, conference calls for interactive discussion).

- Make wider use of videoconferencing for more complex decisions or discussions.

- Share the inconvenience. Rotate the time of virtual meetings so no one person always has to get up early or stay up late.

- Make work visible. Use SharePoint or some other collaborative software and

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post work and action plans so team members can check on progress.

• Clarify decision authority so action can be taken in a timely manner even when time zones make inclusion difficult or impossible.

Rick Lepsinger is the president of OnPoint Consulting. The focus of Lepsinger's work has been on helping leaders and organizations close the gap between strategy and execution, work effectively in a matrix organization, and lead and collaborate in a virtual environment. His most recent book is "Virtual Team Success: A Practical Guide for Working and Leading from a Distance," which is co-authored with Darleen Derosa.

Virtual Teams from the Neuroscience Lab

By David Rock

Yael Zofi's article touches on many issues that researchers are studying in the neuroscience lab, in particular within a field called Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience (or SCAN for short) — a new field that has emerged in the last decade.

In the SCAN field, researchers study issues such as persuasion, automatic bias and prejudice, attitudes and stereotypes, empathy, theory of mind and in-group/out-group theory. This last area is of great importance for the whole issue of virtual teams. It turns out that the brain classifies every person you meet as similar to or different from you, as friend or foe. And here's the challenge: People you don't know tend to be classified as foes until proven otherwise, and a virtual environment offers little opportunity to connect enough with people to dampen down this natural threat response we have of strangers.

Which kind of people you non-consciously think you are surrounded by has a big impact on brain functioning. You use one set of brain circuits for thinking about people whom you believe are like you, a friend, and a different set for those whom you view as different from you, a foe. When your brain decides someone is a friend, you process your interactions using a similar part of the brain you use for thinking about your own experience. And when people in your in-group experience pain, you relate to this using a different brain region than when people are in your out-group.

When you interconnect your thoughts, emotions and goals with other people in your in-group, you release of oxytocin, a pleasurable chemical. It's the same chemical experience that small children get when they make physical contact with their mothers. In a paper published in *Nature* in June 2005, a group of scientists found that giving people a spray containing oxytocin increased their levels of trust. The paper reports that in nonhuman mammals, "oxytocin receptors are distributed in various brain regions associated with behavior, including pair-bonding, maternal care, sexual behavior and normal social attachments. Thus, oxytocin seems to permit animals to overcome their natural avoidance of proximity and thereby facilitates approach behavior." Our animal instincts seem to naturally cause us to withdraw and treat others as foes, unless a situation arises that generates oxytocin. This phenomenon makes sense: It explains why facilitators and trainers insist on "icebreakers" at the start of workshops and why "establish rapport" is the first step in any counseling, customer service or sales training manual. And it explains why things can go so wrong in virtual teams without good leadership.

When you sense someone is a foe, all sorts of brain functions change. You don't interact with a perceived foe using the same brain regions you would use to process your own experience. One study showed that when you perceive someone as a competitor, you don't feel empathy with him or her. Less empathy equals less oxytocin, which means a less pleasant sensation of collaboration overall. Thinking someone is a foe can even literally make you less smart, according to one paper published in 2002.

When you think someone is a foe, you don't just miss out on feeling his or her emotions; you also inhibit yourself from thinking his or her ideas, even if that person is right. Think of a time you were angry with someone. Was it easy to see things from his or her perspective? When you decide someone is a foe, you tend to discard his or her ideas — sometimes to your detriment.

All of this points to the need to be more aware of the automatic nature of this friend/foe response and more consciously question whether our automatic reactions to other people are always in our best interests. In a virtual environment, where there are fewer smiles and pleasant faces to dampen our natural threat response, we have to work even harder to ensure that everyone on the same team actually treats each other as truly on the same team.

Dr. David Rock is the founder and CEO of the NeuroLeadership Group, a global consulting and training firm with operations in 24 countries. Rock coined the term "NeuroLeadership" and co-founded the NeuroLeadership Institute, a global initiative bringing neuroscientists and leadership experts together to build a new science for leadership development.