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**HELPING TRANSNATIONAL TEAM  
MEMBERS TO SENSE TRUST: A  
COUNTERINTUITIVE APPROACH TO  
LEADERSHIP**

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## **Abstract**

Despite their assignment to work together, members of transnational teams (TNTs)— teams whose members are geographically spread across at least two countries— are in many ways apart. This is because TNT members' differences often include the different time zones they work in, the different nation-based cultural customs and norms they typically follow, and the different native, or primary, languages they speak. The interpersonal as well as task-related uncertainty associated with these differences increase the need for sensemaking in these teams. Since trust is the lubricant for obtaining collaborative team performance, in this chapter we develop a conceptual model of trust-related sensemaking in TNTs. That is, we identify factors that may influence the extent to which TNT members sense that they can trust each other, and as a result, wish to give this team their fullest collaborative potential (despite the local demands also competing for their time). Importantly, we identify distinctive characteristics of TNTs that seem likely to complicate, even aggravate, the trust-related sensemaking process described in our literature review on dyadic-relationships or domestic teams. Drawing from the trust and social dilemma literatures, as well as the third author's experience leading her own TNT, we offer interventions that may be used by the leader of the TNT to counteract the trust-reducing properties of a TNT. We emphasize that the effectiveness of each intervention depends on: (1) the cultural sensitivity, on a person-by-person basis, with which it is applied, and (2) team members' consensual agreement that "particularistic" human resource strategies are acceptable. Said differently, we advocate the use of "universal particularism" in TNTs. In so doing we highlight the importance of eliminating from the (mostly single-country) team literature the tendency to assume that "one size fits all," and eliminating from the cross-cultural literature the tendency to assume that the cultural values of "universalism" and "particularism" cannot co-exist. We conclude the chapter by noting how the conceptual framework builds upon and extends prior models of trust and teamwork.

To set the stage for the dynamics to be addressed in the paper, imagine the following scenario:

*A large U.S. manufacturing company acquires a series of small tractor manufacturing companies from Italy, Japan, and Brazil, each producing similar products for their regions. In order to achieve the hoped for synergy from these acquisitions, the product development processes of these companies must be integrated. So amid rumors that some locations will be downsized in the future, the company creates a transnational team comprised of the product development people from the U.S. firm but also from the acquired companies located in Europe, Asia, and South America. Not only have these people never worked together before (or even known each other), they are expected to produce a new product line within 18 months (rather than the more typical 2-3 year cycle) which will meet the varied needs of the 3 different regions— a formidable task. No one relocates although they do travel on a periodic basis to the other locations for meetings. Most communication occurs through weekly conference calls and daily emails – this despite the fact that for most, English is not their native tongue, they have different cultural values, and they operate on considerably different time zones. Consequently, during the majority of their work time, these team members cannot see, phone, or readily understand each other.*

Such a scenario is not uncommon in today’s business environment. In the last ten years, management scholars have noted that work assignments are increasingly international and team-based (see Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997, for a review). As a result, there has been a dramatic increase in the use of transnational teams (TNTs) (cf. Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Snow, Snell, Canney Davison, & Hambrick, 1996). Such teams require employees to make team-based decisions with team members who are geographically spread across at least two different countries and whose national languages and customs are different. When TNTs are formed, members typically do not know each other or have a history of working with one another. TNT assignments are typically supplemental to local responsibilities so membership requires extra effort on the part of team members. Their assigned tasks are often strategically important and highly complex (Maznevski & Chudoba, forthcoming).

As with any team, TNT members have to grapple with the inherent “social dilemma,” or “mixed motives,” inherent in teamwork (cf. Bazerman, Mannix, & Thompson, 1988; Yamagishi,

1993)-- TNT members must choose the extent to which they will behave cooperatively (i.e., give priority to the TNT's needs) versus self-interestedly (i.e., give priority to their own local needs). To avoid being a "sucker" (a pejorative term for uncooperative behavior, cf. Schnake, 1991), group members generally decide to act cooperatively when they can *trust* the others to be cooperative as well (Mishra, 1996).

Trust is defined as the willingness of a team member to make him or herself vulnerable to the actions of the other team members based on the prior belief that they are trustworthy (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Said differently, trust is the belief that "...another's future actions will be favorable, or at least not detrimental, to one's interests" (Morrison & Robinson, 1997: 238). Trust develops as team members make sense of their interactions with the members of their team in terms of their benevolence, integrity, and ability (cf. Mayer et al., 1995). Trust is the "lubricant" team members need to work together productively. Trust reduces fears of being punished or ridiculed for making mistakes. With trust, members keep their promises and are consistent between words and deeds. And, within limits, trusting team members can be honest and frank with one another. Importantly, prior research has shown that trust is critical for team members to be actively engaged behaviorally, emotionally, and intellectually in team activities (Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner, 1998; Spreitzer, Noble, Mishra, & Cooke, 1999). In turn, such team involvement has been found to be critical to team performance in terms of achieving critical team goals (Spreitzer et al., 1999).

Building trust is especially important but complicated in TNTs because of their ambiguity and uncertainty, for as Meyerson, Weick and Kramer (1996: 176) suggest "trust is coincident with uncertainty." More specifically, the geographical distance between TNT members requires them to communicate virtually via long-distance technology (by e-mail and audio or

teleconferencing)— technology that lacks the richness provided by facial (or other non-verbal) cues. Moreover, cultural differences and the lack of a common language increase the probability of misunderstanding because team members often work under vastly different assumptions about organizational practices, human behavior and relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to better understand the trust-related sensemaking process so important in facilitating TNT member cooperation. We begin by briefly discussing what we already know about trust-related sensemaking in teams. Then, we ask how this process is different in the context of TNTs, and we offer conceptual models to illustrate our propositions. Our integrative conceptual model addresses what we see as a central void in the team literature— how trust-building interventions can help TNT members make sense of the ambiguous and uncertain TNT-environment. We conclude our chapter by discussing its contributions.

### **Trust-related Sensemaking**

“Making sense” requires someone to derive meaning, or understanding, from information whose meaning is perhaps initially uncertain or ambiguous. The sensemaking process cannot be disentangled from the team member’s own personal experiences, expectations, assumptions, and values. Thus, there is nothing “objective” about the sensemaking process. Two members may see the very same behavior and interpret it very differently. Morrison and Robinson (1997) explain:

*“Divergent perceptions increase with the complexity and ambiguity of the stimulus being perceived (Griffin & Ross, 1991). Two interrelated processes account for these divergent perceptions. First, when individuals must attend to, make sense of, and store either a large number of stimuli or stimuli with a large number of features, they are likely to overlook or forget certain pieces of information. Thus, any two individuals perceiving the same set of stimuli are likely to perceive, store, and ultimately recall somewhat different representations, which will lead to incongruence. Second, when individuals must make sense of ambiguous stimuli, they engage in a construal process, whereby they fill in missing gaps by relying on contextual cues and prior information (Griffin & Ross, 1991).”*

The need for sensemaking is especially acute in situations marked by unfamiliarity (cf. Louis, 1980), where those attempting to make sense of a situation for the first time *cannot* draw upon previous experiences stored in their memory, as sensemakers typically do (Griffin & Ross, 1991). Theorists and researchers in social psychology and organizational behavior have long noted that people generally ask “why” questions, or become “hypervigilant” (Janis & Mann, 1977), when they feel uncertain or surprised about something that is important to them (cf. Louis, 1980; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Wong & Weiner, 1981).

Particularly when a team is just beginning to work together (Simons & Peterson, 1999) as is the case with most TNTs, team members try to make sense of each other’s behaviors in order to develop a team mental model (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994) or shared understanding (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). Team members infer intentions and appraise each other’s behaviors. Morrison and Robinson (1997: 242) explain: “This interpretation process represents an employee’s attempt to make sense of, or attach meaning to, the event that has transpired (cf. Frijda, 1988; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988).”

More specifically, employees search for evidence that team members are engaging in self-interested behaviors or have hidden agendas (Amason, 1997; Jehn, 1997). When team members distrust each other, they tend to interpret ambiguous behaviors as sinister or selfish in intent (Simons & Peterson, 1999). So when a team member offers the use of her engineer for the team’s project, team members may likely infer that the team member has some ulterior motive, and less likely to infer that the engineer is the best person for the job. Such misattribution of behavior can easily lead team members to an inability to work together functionally. Instead, they feel that that they have to constantly monitor others’ behaviors and be vigilant in assessing ulterior motives. When team members trust each other, however, they will likely accept other

members' behaviors at face value and will be less likely to misinterpret behaviors or infer sinister intentions. So when that team member offers the use of her own engineer, other team members feel appreciative that she is offering a valuable resource rather than questioning her intentions.

Figure 1 illustrates this trust-related sensemaking process. A member of a new TNT (or alternatively a new member of an existing TNT) is initially uncertain about how trustworthy the team members are, so s/he begins to make sense of the others' benevolence (Arrow A), integrity (Arrow B), and ability (Arrow C)— these being what we will call “trust-attributes.” Through this sensemaking process, the extent to which the team member perceives he or she can trust the others begins to gel (as illustrated by Arrow D); this is why Mayer et al. (1995) referred to these trust-attributes as antecedents to trust. The more that team members trust each other, the more that they will interpret each others' interactions in a positive way. Finally, our model indicates (via Arrow F) that more trust will facilitate a greater willingness to cooperate and take initiative on behalf of the team's mission (Kramer, Brewer & Hanna, 1996; Meyerson et al., 1996).

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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The trust-related sensemaking process described thus far applies to almost any kind of team. Now we turn to the question of what, if anything, is different about this sensemaking process for TNTs?

### **Characteristics that Distinguish TNTs from Other Teams**

We argue that there are two conditions inherent to TNTs which make the issue of trust even more salient than for more traditional teams: (1) members are geographically distant from each other, and (2) members are culturally, including linguistically, different from each other. The implications of these conditions for trust are described below.

First, TNTs work virtually. We may have had experiences when an email attempt at humor was received by another as an offensive remark, resulting in an angered response. The fact that TNT members operate in long-distance mode makes it more challenging for them to interact on a frequent basis. Their geographic dispersion prevents them, for example, from walking down the hall to each other's offices to obtain a quick answer to a question. This distance can significantly impair team-building processes because it will take members longer to get to know one another. Some TNTs never even have the opportunity to meet face-to-face. Moreover, differences in the time zones in which people spend their working hours limit the window for real-time team member interaction. If one part of the team were in the U.S. and another part in Hong Kong, the best and perhaps only reasonable time to interact in real time would be 7 a.m. or 7 p.m.— not always convenient hours for work. Communication often does not occur in real time, so even questions of clarification must often wait several hours or even days for a response.

Second, because team members come from different countries, they have substantial cultural and linguistic differences. They often do not share a common primary language. If the official language for business is English and half the team speaks limited English, then it is quite predictable which team members will dominate team interactions (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). Language issues alone can create significant issues in understanding one another but these are compounded by cultural differences. The elusivity of trust is especially great when people see others as “outgroup” (rather than ingroup) members, as is likely when people are visibly (e.g., nationally) different (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999), and even more likely when visibly different people lack social interaction and, thus, the chance to observe each others' potential (cognitive or behavioral) similarities (cf. Thatcher & Jehn, 1998). Lacking this information,



people generally rely more on stereotype-guided knowledge (cf. Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992), further strengthening ingroup-outgroup distinctions (Cramton & Webber, 2000; Nemeth, 1993), hence lowering team identity and, thereby, intrateam trust (Kramer, 1993).

Furthermore, discordant assumptions about the nature and value of social relationships, the role of the individual, hierarchy, and power can create both ambiguity and conflict. It becomes more difficult to operate as a team when some team members are more individualistic (i.e., see self as independent and self-controlling) and others more collectivistic (i.e., see self as embedded in the social network), when some assume high power distance in relationships (i.e., acquiesce to status) and others assume low power distance (i.e., treat others as equals), when some are masculine in their cultural values (i.e., focus on task-accomplishment), and others are instead feminine (i.e., focus on harmonious relationships). For example, what happens when some team members are very direct in their interactions and others use a less direct style, even to the point of never using the word “no” (Shapiro & Von Glinow, 1999)? There is clearly great potential for misunderstanding when this team first starts working together, impairing the process of team development (cf. Janssens & Brett, 1997; Jehn & Weldon, 1997a, 1997b).

Both of these conditions— virtuality and cultural/linguistic differences— enhance the potential for significant ambiguity and uncertainty in the TNT. The manner in which these TNT characteristics may affect teams’ trust-related sensemaking is illustrated in Figure 2. Specifically, this figure summarizes our belief that TNT members will be more uncertain of each other’s trustworthiness when they have: greater reliance on non-face-to-face communication (shown by Arrow G) resulting from their geographic distances (shown by Arrow J); and greater cultural, value and linguistic-differences (shown by Arrows H and I, respectively), resulting from their cultural (nation-based) differences, (shown by Arrows K and L, respectively).

Figure 3 shows a summary of the relationships just described: namely, that TNT characteristics will increase the uncertainty team members feel (see Arrow 1) regarding each other's trust-attributes (see Arrow 2) and in turn their actual trust in team members (see Arrow 3). This trust in turn facilitates a sensemaking process that enhances trust expectations (see Arrow 4) and team members' willingness to cooperate (see Arrow 5).

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The challenge is then to help TNT members *to make sense* of uncertainty so that they can build trust to work together functionally. Given the substantial uncertainty that TNT members have in assessing their teammates' trustworthiness, the question then becomes what sort of interventions can be used to increase the level of trust among team members. In the next section of the paper, we focus on the specific interventions that may facilitate high levels of trust among TNT members. We draw upon the experience of one author in managing a TNT, as well as the extant literature, to support the theoretical relationships we propose. The influence of these interventions is indicated by Arrow 6 in our theoretical framework.

### **Interventions for Building Trust in TNTs**

What actions might be taken to overcome the abundant opportunities available to TNT members to distrust each other? Asked more positively, what actions might enhance TNT members' mutual trust of each other? To answer these questions, we draw on the growing literature on trust as well as the literature on social dilemmas to examine trust-creation for cooperative behavior in groups or teams where there is strong temptation to instead act selfishly (e.g., to be a free-rider) in ways that ultimately harm the group's interest.

But first, we must address the question of who should be the interferon? For two reasons, we believe the interventions must come from a team leader (who is usually part of the TNT). The team leader plays the role of Meyerson et al.'s (1996) "contractor." First, prior research has found that the leader's role in designing the team and creating a team culture is critical to effective team development (Cohen, Ledford & Spreitzer, 1996; Teagarden et al., 1995). Second, leaders' guidance is especially needed during times of uncertainty (Argote, Turner, & Fichman, 1989), a characteristic we have identified as inherent to TNT assignments. In this regard, we now turn to the specific leader interventions in TNTs that we believe will increase trust among these teams' culturally-, linguistically-, and geographically distant members. In the case of each intervention, we first discuss how the intervention can facilitate trust and cooperation, then we discuss some of the specific challenges the TNT leader must deal with given the cross-cultural differences among the members of the team, and finally we make specific recommendations for actions on the part of TNT leadership.

### **Setting Consensus-based Norms for Cooperative Behavior**

Norms build trust because they generate consistency in behavior (Mishra, 1996). Earley and Mosakowski (2000: 26) argue that effective cross-cultural teams must have "an emergent, simplified set of rules, norms, expectations and roles that team members share and enact." This kind of shared understanding offers a common sense of identity and facilitates team interaction and performance (Meyerson et al., 1996). Without agreed-upon norms, then team members will not have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and consequently self-interest may drive behavior. The process of creating expectations has been called "norming" (Tuckman, 1965), or "norm-setting" (Bennis & Shepherd, 1956). Norms relevant for a TNT might include

how much time team members are expected to allocate to the team's needs, what are the best ways and times to communicate with one another, how to handle misunderstandings, etc.

Since the greatest level of trust-related uncertainty among visibly-different team members is likely to occur at the team's conception, this is the time when team members will look to a leader for help (cf. Argote et al., 1989). Thus, we believe the leader of the TNT must assist the team members in setting norms early in the team's development. While it may be possible to develop cooperative norms virtually, the chance for misunderstanding when facial cues are absent lead us to believe that this norm-setting discussion should ideally occur in a face-to-face setting (cf. Daft & Lengel, 1984). Obviously, this requires the members of the team to travel to meet in person. An introductory retreat might occur at a central location where members have few distractions so they can focus on norm building.

**The challenge of developing norms in TNTs.** Creating collective norms is often difficult in a TNT because members often come from such different cultures with conflicting values that may impair the team's cohesiveness. For example, in order to create mutual norms of *cooperation*, it must be clear what behaviors will be deemed "cooperative" as well as "non-cooperative." What is cooperative and noncooperative behavior is clear in the laboratory setting of prisoner dilemma studies in which participants, almost always from the U.S. (hence single-country), typically have a dichotomous choice of pushing a "cooperate" or "compete" button (Coleman, 1982); however, the answer is far less clear when the judgment of what is cooperative behavior comes from people whose cultural values differ. As an example, the cooperative gestures (e.g., helping fellow employees in their work) that people from the U.S. call "organizational citizenship behavior" (Organ, 1988), may be seen differently by people in China where such behavior is generally expected (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997). In another example,

Scandura, Von Glinow, and Lowe (1997) found that organizational leaders in the U.S. were viewed positively when they solicited input from employees before making decisions, but in Saudi Arabia organizational leaders exhibiting this behavior were instead viewed as weak. In summary, then, what constitutes “cooperative behavior” may not be universally shared, due to people’s different cultural values (cf. Farh et al., 1997; Scandura et al., 1997) making it difficult to build consensus regarding cooperative norms.

**Some recommendations.** This complexity in the norm-setting process suggests the leader must do three things. First, the leader must be sure that the norm-setting process begins in the first interactions of the TNT. Second, the leader must ask each team member to specifically name the behaviors that s/he views as cooperative (either on a flipchart if meeting face-to-face, or via shared email if meeting virtually) so that the similar as well as different behaviors can be seen by all. Third, the leader must encourage the TNT members to talk with each other about whatever differences on the list seem to be competing (as would occur, for example, if authoritative and participatory decision making styles both appeared on the list).

More specifically, the leader must encourage the TNT members to brainstorm ways in which *all* the desired behaviors can co-exist (for example, an authoritative, rather than participatory, decision making style may be acceptable in certain situations and not in others), and/or to agree on the behaviors that their team uniquely will endorse (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). This process helps to create a culture unique to the team, a notion similar to Janssens and Brett’s (1997) “meaningful participation” and Jehn and Weldon’s (1997a) “synergistic collaboration.” All of these actions have been recommended for effectively managing nationally-diverse exchanges.

We recognize that practical constraints (such as limited travel budgets) may limit the extent to which the norm-setting process can be conducted. To make this process easier, timing the conception of a TNT with an event (e.g., a shareholders' meeting or other types of business meetings) that the team members might generally attend (Teagarden et al., 1995). We recognize, too, that an onsite gathering does not solve the problem of comprehension difficulties created by TNT members' native-language-differences. For this reason, the leader guiding the norm-setting process would ideally be multilingual. Finally, we recognize that the different cultural values will make some team members more, and some less, comfortable engaging in the direct style of communicating advocated above for setting norms (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). However, because people's preference for indirect communication is believed to be due to their concern about losing face or creating disharmony (Ting-Toomey, 1988), we believe that all TNT members will be likely to embrace (not merely tolerate) the direct communication style if the leader makes each member believe that doing so will *strengthen* (not hurt) team harmony. Hence, the leader must frame the norm-setting process so that *all* can understand the ultimate goal.

### **Setting Consensus-based Norm-Consistent Rewards and Punishments**

Cooperative norms are not enough to build the trust necessary for cooperative behavior. Even if there are norms for cooperation, if members still believe it is still in their best interests to act competitively, then trust will suffer and TNT members will not cooperate. For example, if one member of the team is individually recognized for some accomplishment that was really due to the team's efforts, then the other members of the team are likely to feel taken advantage of and will be less likely to trust that team member in future interactions. If some team members

receive more than their share of the team rewards, then trust will break down and the cooperative team member will turn competitive (Adams, 1963). If team members who act cooperatively are rewarded equitably, then the integrity of the team effort is maintained and members are likely to *continue* behaving cooperatively (cf. Mishra, 1996).

The extent to which team members make gestures of cooperation (e.g., volunteer to lead a particularly time-intensive aspect of the team's task or speak directly about whatever differences emerge when selecting desired team behaviors) thus depends ultimately— not on whether the team has norms for cooperation, but— on whether such actions are rewarded and not punished. This is why it is important, that after team members create norms for cooperation, that they put into place a norm-consistent incentive system that aligns self-interest with the team norms. This occurs when team members are rewarded for team-oriented behavior. When team members are rewarded for team-oriented behavior, it is in their self-interest to contribute to the team. This alignment of self-interest with team-interest reduces the inherent social dilemma of teams (cf. Yamagishi, 1993) and increases the likelihood of intrateam trust.

**The challenge of creating meaningful rewards/punishments in TNTs.** The challenge for a TNT is how to develop an incentive system for a multinational, heterogeneous group. Because the rewards that people value have been found to differ across countries, transnational team members are unlikely to easily agree on the incentive system needed to support the team's norms. For example, maintenance- as opposed to task-contributions have generally been found to be valued more by team members who are collectivists rather than individualists; and the reverse has been generally true for individualists rather than collectivists (Gomez, Kirkman, & Shapiro, in press). As another example, team members from countries that are more collectivistic (such as China) have generally been found to prefer resource-allocations that are

equal instead of equity-based (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Chen, 1995; Kim, Park, & Suzuki, 1990). However, it is equally true that indigenous Chinese bargain for higher levels of compensation when non-Chinese expatriates are involved, as is the case with most international joint ventures in China. The latter finding is consistent with recent findings showing that collectivists, more so than individualists, tend to be less generous with outgroup (as opposed to ingroup) members (cf. Gomez, Kirkman & Shapiro, in press). Thus some calculus for assessing the conditions under which equality-based rewards, or some other allocation scheme, will be valued must be determined.

While creating a reward system that will be valued across cultures is difficult, creating effective punishments across cultures may be nearly impossible. In the U.S. context, it may be acceptable but uncomfortable to single out a member of a team because of unacceptable behavior. Yet in Asian and Latin American contexts, singling out one member is likely to be completely out of line (Adler, 1997) because of the focus on saving face to minimize the potential for embarrassment. In these cultures, the subtle act of withholding praise may be punishment enough (Fahr & Cheng, 1999). Moreover, the public act of giving praise can be construed as non-praiseworthy, even punishing to some, since it will be noted that the leader must have assumed the TNT member to be incapable of performing in the first instance. Thus, it is likely to be difficult to obtain a consensus regarding what is a “reward” and what is a “punishment” as a result of team members’ nation-based value differences. This is why a common incentive system for TNT members may not be possible, or even desirable.

**Some recommendations.** The complexity just described suggests that TNT members’ incentive systems may need to differ, in order to enable each to receive an outcome that s/he would deem rewarding. The leader may find it useful to talk individually with team members



about what types of rewards/recognition they value/prefer. Then, the leader can attempt to create a reward system that equitably builds in these elements for specific team members. It is important that the result of this be communicated in a public manner so that team members will not feel that special deals for individual members are being created under the table, or worse, if employment laws have been broken.

With regard to the latter, Cheeseman (1997: 441) notes that U.S. law— via Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, entitled the “Fair Employment Practices Act” and more recently (after being amended in 1972) called the “Equal Opportunity Act”— identifies employment practices as “unlawful” if they “.... discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or *national origin* (emphasis ours). In addition to possibly be law-breaking, if TNT members feel that the leader is giving special treatment to some at the expense of others, this will degrade the trust-building process, and thereby increase the possibility of litigious activity (cf. Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998).

Assuming the latter obstacles can be overcome, the TNT leader, as well as the TNT members, in the first instance need to be made comfortable with the possibility that there will be *inconsistency* in the rewards and punishments that TNT members receive based upon cultural preferences. We expect this inconsistency to be less uncomfortable for the TNT members who come from “particularistic” societies, such as China, since they tend to be comfortable with individualized treatment and care (Farh & Cheng, 1999). In contrast, we expect the TNT members who come from “universalistic” countries (Schwartz, 1992), such as the U.S., to be uncomfortable with procedural inconsistency since the latter characteristic is generally deemed evidence of procedural injustice in general (cf. Lind & Tyler, 1988), or unlawful employment

practice in particular (Cheeseman, 1997). Thus, these behavioral differences need to be among those discussed by TNT members as part of the norm-setting process described above. As we have noted, we realize that we are tampering here with discriminatory employment practices, and thus we tread somewhat cautiously. However, some differential treatment is clearly warranted *if* it makes sense within the cross-cultural team environment (see Kirkman & Shapiro, in press, for a similar view). We will return to this point at the conclusion of the chapter.

### **Providing Norm-Consistent Resources and Capabilities to TNT Members**

The above two interventions help TNT members believe it is in their best interest to (i.e., want to) trust and cooperate with each other. But just because they *want* to trust one another and cooperate does not mean that they *can* do these things. Team members must have the resources and capability to be able to trust each other and behave in a cooperative manner. For example, if team members are competing for scarce resources, it will be hard for them to trust each other and behave cooperatively. As a corollary, a robust finding in the literature on empowerment and employee involvement is that it is not enough to give employees the opportunity and incentive to be empowered, but employees must have the skills and information so that they *can* behave in an empowered way (Lawler, 1996; Spreitzer, 1996). If they don't have the necessary capability, they will not feel the self-efficacy necessary to behave in empowered ways. If they don't have the access to information and resources, they will not know how to focus their empowered behaviors. Similarly, then, TNT members are unlikely to believe they CAN trust and cooperate, *if they lack the resources needed to behave this way*. Next, we identify the resources that we believe TNTs must have if their members are to be *able* to trust and cooperate: (1) intrateam communication, (2) team competence, and (3) access to information. Our selection of these

resources (as opposed to others) is based on the fact that each has been identified as a key determinant of team members' feeling of trust and empowerment (Spreitzer, 1996), and/or experienced by the third-author in her TNT.

**Providing mechanisms for intrateam communication.** TNT members' ability to trust and cooperate with each other will be eased when they know each other well and can easily communicate with each other, for trust is built through experience (Mayer et al., 1995). If prior interactions indicate an individual is trustworthy, then trust increases. If prior experience, even vicarious, indicates that a team member acts solely in self-interest, then trust will suffer. Good communication is also essential for team members to be able to work through conflicts as they arise. Rather than letting misunderstandings fester, teams with good communication can more easily overcome their problems. Of particular importance to a virtual team is access to sophisticated electronic technology that allows members to readily send and receive emails, and to have regular audio-conference and video-conference calls (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). Two types of collaborative software may be particularly helpful for team communication. The first involves sharing traditional software products through desktop videoconferencing systems that allow members to share any application running on any one of their individual computers (Townsend, et al., 1998). The second is group support systems such as Lotus Notes that facilitate brainstorming and group decision making so that the team may interact seamlessly. Moreover, the increasing use of company intranets and the worldwide web are likely to increase communication and information flow in TNTs.

**Some challenges to intrateam communication in a TNT.** First, the fact that some members of the team may not be fluent in the official language of the team may make communicating with team members, and *commonly* understanding what has been said, more

challenging (cf. Kanter & Corn, 1994). Second, the technologies discussed above are only effective to the extent that they are compatible and enable connection and collaboration (Cohen & Gibson, 2000). Often times, team members may have access to different versions of the same software or different software brands (e.g., Microsoft word versus WordPerfect, or more versus less recent versions of the same software); and these differences may limit compatibility at the extreme or be an irritation at the minimum. Major technological barriers to communication include differences in information technology platforms and tools and insufficient support for implementation and use of technologies. Economic differences between countries are likely to influence the quality (and currency) of the technological resources available to the companies within them.

**Some recommendations.** The leader of a TNT must assist the team members in getting to know each other through regular communication with each other. For reasons mentioned previously, the best way for this to occur initially is probably through face-to-face interaction. Because this requires sufficient resources to enable some regular travel, the team leader can offer a budget for the team members to meet each other in person. Such visits are also critical for team members to understand the context in which team members are working. For example, if one team member comes from a less developed country, it is helpful for the other team members to see the hurdles that team member faces in terms of less access to cutting edge technology or trained employees (cf. Milliman, Von Glinow, & Nathan, 1991). It also enables the team members to better understand important cultural differences that are often manifested in social interactions, such as eating together, and thus build trust. In addition to facilitating face-to-face interaction, it is useful for the TNT leader to personally have, or have access to, someone else

who has some fluency in the additional languages of the TNT members to monitor the communication.

**Enhancing team competence.** Another important team resource is competence. Barber (1983, as quoted in Meyerson et al., 1996:190) has said: “The expectation of technically competent role performance is known as fiduciary trust.” Mayer et al. (1995) have identified competence as a key element of trust as well. The reason why members’ competence and trust are so tightly linked is because it is the competent team members who others will be willing to trust to carry their own weight. Conversely, if a team member is perceived as *not* being competent in his or her role, team members will not trust that person to contribute effectively to the team’s mission, and therefore, will find ways to work around that person. The inequitable contributions of less competent team members will probably lead to negative affect and behavior on the part of other team members who believe they are “carrying” the incompetent member (cf. Adams, 1963; Schnake, 1991). Each team member should therefore bring a special expertise or knowledge to the team as part of his or her fiduciary duty. While task-related skills are necessary (important) for members to trust each other, process skills are critical to maintaining that trust. Members must be capable of working together through the inevitable conflicts and problems that will arise throughout the team’s interactions.

**Challenges to building a competent TNT.** There are several characteristics of TNTs that may prevent members from, at least readily, perceiving each other to be competent. First, as mentioned earlier, most of the time TNT members will be unable to interact with each other in real time (due to the TNT members’ geographic distances); TNT members’ cognitive abilities *in the process of doing work* will therefore generally be unseen.

Second, the visible diversity of TNT members and the resulting ingroup-outgroup distinctions (cf. Tsui et al., 1992) are likely to influence the competence that TNT members do, or don't, see. For example, the degree to which men accept women as "equals," hence as part of their ingroup, is likely to vary across countries, such as those where status is strongly versus weakly gender-based. Greater competence is generally expected from those who have higher, rather than lower, ascribed (physical-based) status (cf. Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, & Rosenholtz, 1993). Berger et al. explain that the latter bias has been found to favor people from countries with higher economic status as well. The importance of having TNT members perceive each other as competent, and the difficulty in obtaining this perception among TNT members (possibly for the reasons noted above), may explain why our third author found the TNT member-selection process to be one of the most critical and time-consuming actions in managing her TNT. In fact, it took several years to get the right balance of people who could contribute and provide necessary expertise on the project

Third, because of the team's cultural differences, developing process-oriented skills like conflict management may be particularly difficult in the TNT because different cultures are likely to have very different approaches. For example, in some cultures, it is viewed as very appropriate to address conflict directly while in other cultures, it is more appropriate to avoid or suppress conflict. Thus, relative to domestic teams, TNTs will have to work harder to develop appropriate ways to handle these sorts of team processes. The norm building process described earlier may be an important starting point for this endeavor but these process-oriented skills must be cultivated over time depending upon the composition of the TNT. For example, some cultures do not interact well with other cultures, and no amount of "processing" of those

differences will result in a functional relationship. In this case, some type of buffering must be considered.

**Some recommendations.** First, the team leader must identify what task-related skills are necessary for the team to operate effectively. Then the leader must select team members who collectively represent that skill set. Then after selecting these members, the leader must explain to the team why each member was selected so that all can understand the particular skills and resources that each team member brings to bear to the team's efforts. In the case where some team members come from cultures that do not interact well with other cultures (Israel and Palestine as an example), the leader must insert some buffers to legitimate the distance, or rely upon the professionalism of the members to perform the task. This is a conscious decision to be made initially, as well as throughout the duration of the TNT.

Once the team is composed, then it is important for the leader to ensure that team members get appropriate training in critical team processes such as conflict management, managing diversity, problem solving, etc., so that team members will have the ability to work through problems and overcome misunderstandings. When team members do not have good conflict management skills, then productive types of conflict such as task conflict can escalate into relationship or emotional conflict (Simons & Peterson, 1999). The team may find that it must spend an inordinate amount of time on process issues due to the different cultural values represented (cf. Teagarden et al., 1995; Janssens & Brett, 1997).

**Providing equal access to sensitive information.** We identify information as another important resource that falls directly from a key dimension of trust-- that is, openness (Mishra, 1996). In order for team members to trust each other, they must believe that everyone is privy to the same information— that no essential information is being held back and not shared across the

team. This might include sensitive financial information about the performance of the organization or work unit (“the books”). It might include proprietary information having to do with the strategy of the firm or unit (e.g., information on a potential acquisition). If some team members have information that others don’t have, then it is difficult to build trust because members do not believe that they are all on equal footing. When members do not have full information, it is equally difficult for those team members who are the keepers of the information because they have to be careful about who has access to what pieces of information, adding to the complexity of team interactions.

**Challenges to sharing information.** The notion of sharing information may also be more challenging in the context of a cross-cultural team. For example, in Chinese cultures which tend to have more paternalistic leadership, it common for there to be tight control on information, even to the point of secrecy (Farh & Cheng, 1999). Subordinates are only told information on strictly a “need to know” basis, if at all. This is not due to a lack of trust in subordinates, but rather in the leader having responsibility to take care of subordinates and often to make decisions as he or she sees fit. Furthermore, in Chinese societies information is clearly viewed as source of power that will weaken one’s status if shared, particularly in the context of a negotiation. This is in contrast to many Western societies where there has been a move to democratize the workforce, including sharing important information across organizational boundaries (Lawler, 1996). Thus, some team members may be more comfortable with restrictive information whereas others may find that any constraints in information flow will impair team functioning and ultimately hurt team trust.

**Some recommendations.** Team members of all nationalities are likely to be more comfortable sharing information if it is made clear why sharing information is important. If they



can see how distributed information can help the team make better decisions and work more cooperatively together, then members are more likely to want to share sensitive information with each other. Adler (1997) notes that it is imperative in multinational teams for team leaders to guard against disproportionate information being given to members with the same cultural background as the leader or members from the most technologically advanced or economically-advantaged countries, or those with ideologies consonant with the leader. Clearly, if all members are believed to provide a critical capability (as discussed earlier), it will be clearer why important information should be shared across the team. Interestingly, our return to “should” returns us, again, to the importance of identifying information-sharing, *and specifically what kind of information to share*, as part of the TNT’s norm-setting process.

**A final thought on leader interventions: Managing Emotional Boundaries.** The description of the norm-setting process that nearly all of our recommended interventions return to implicitly suggests that all desired behaviors in TNTs can be identified, and then normed. However, the team will not be aware of unforeseen dynamics that could emerge and hence some behaviors will go unidentified and “un-normed.” Said differently, even the best-laid plans are often disrupted. The emergence of these disruptions is likely to create negative emotions (cf. Morrison & Robinson, 1997) and halt or reverse the trust-building process. These behavioral surprises will awaken the “emotional boundaries” within the team.

The behaviors that we tend to take for granted are generally those that we do automatically as part of our daily routines— routines that we learned from the cultural socialization we received at an early age. As an example, the following scenario occurred in the Best Practices Team developed by our third author (cf. Shapiro & Von Glinow, 1999). As U.S. Americans, for example, we would readily say “no, thank you” to a request we received if it was

one we felt unable or unwilling to satisfy. Yet, in some Asian cultures, saying “no” would be viewed as rude, and avoiding the request altogether would be viewed as more appropriate or polite. But receiving no reply to one’s request (that is, being ignored) was seen as rude by an American in the third-author’s transnational team. The experience of rude treatment, often referred to as “interactional injustice” (Bies & Moag, 1986), is a noxious one.

We believe that negative behavioral surprises will be less likely to be experienced as rude if the leader of the TNT explicitly communicates to the members the following: (1) all desired behaviors in the TNT *cannot* be thought of in advance, as a result of the “invisibility” of our routine behaviors; (2) undesirable behaviors in the TNT will thus inevitably occur; (3) when they do, TNT members should assume these are culturally-guided and therefore not personal; and (4) if the seemingly rude event occurs more than once, this “cultural data” should be sanitized, and subsequently shared with relevant TNT members with the explicit purpose of obtaining some insight on why this episode occurred and what might be done to prevent something similar from arising in the future. We suggest sanitizing the data, because the last thing a TNT can handle is the explicit loss of someone’s face who is a TNT member. For, if this has occurred, no amount of process skills can likely repair the damage. We refer to the latter procedure as one of “managing emotional boundaries.”

In summary, then, the norm-setting process in TNTs needs to include attention to team members’ emotional boundaries. To focus on only task-related interactions, as advised by some team researchers (e.g., Amason, 1996), may thus be not only unwise for TNTs but debilitating to future functioning of the TNT as an effective unit. This suggests some elasticity must be structured into the norm-setting process to: (1) acknowledge the emotional boundary influences; (2) establish some methodology for dealing with the potential violation of such emotional

boundaries if and when it occurs; and (3) communicate this methodology as well as the concept of the emotional boundary to all TNT members.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF OUR INTEGRATIVE MODEL:**

### **TRUST-RELATED SENSEMAKING IN TNTs**

The theme of the conference and companion book is motivating and sensemaking in groups. Our chapter contributes to this theme by articulating the link between trust-related sensemaking and cooperative behavior in TNTs. It focuses on how leaders of TNTs facilitate the sensemaking process to create fiduciary trust as well as team norms that nurture trust so necessary for TNT effectiveness. We believe that the conceptual framework we have developed builds upon and extends prior models of trust and teamwork. Next, we identify contributions to these literatures, each in turn.

#### **Contributions to the Trust Literature**

With regard to the literature on trust, our model reinforces the belief that trust-assessments are guided by the interpersonal attributes identified by Mayer et al. (1995), namely others' perceived benevolence, integrity, and ability. Additionally, our model highlights how the latter assessments are likely to be influenced by the characteristics unique to TNTs—specifically, by trust-assessors who are *team members with many differences*, including different visible traits, different geographic (national) locations, different cultural values, and different primary languages. While others have examined trust in teams, this focus has excluded nationally-diverse teams (e.g., Kramer, 1993).

A second contribution we make to the trust literature regards our highlighting that the *need* for trust-related sensemaking is potentially greater in transnational, rather than domestic,

teams. This is because, our conceptual framework shows, that the structural characteristics of TNTs (i.e., members' geographic long-distances and nation-based cultural differences) increase the likelihood of uncertainty and ambiguity, factors that give rise to sensemaking activity (cf. Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Drawing on prior work which emphasizes the critical role of leaders during times of uncertainty, we recognize the important role of the TNT leader who must find a way to bridge the cultural differences across team members-- even when that might mean treating team members differently! The critical role we assign to the leader of the TNT may contradict more recent research on teams that emphasizes team *self*-management (Cohen, Ledford, & Spreitzer, 1996; Kirkman & Shapiro, in press). Questions prompted by our conceptual model thus include: Do TNT-characteristics indeed increase members' need for trust-related sensemaking, and/or sensemaking of other kinds? Are teams with these needs helped more by the presence or absence of leader-guided interventions? And under what circumstances, might TNTs be effectively leaderless? Future research is needed to address these timely questions.

### **Contributions to the Team Literature**

With regard to the literature on teamwork, our conceptual model extends previous theorizing in several ways. First, although others have examined conflict-issues in nationally-different teams (Janssens & Brett, 1997; Jehn & Weldon, 1997a), their focus has excluded issues pertaining to trust-related sensemaking. Our focus on trust-related sensemaking has helped us to identify interventions that may be helpful in building trust in TNTs whose structural characteristics may generally impede this. The interventions we have identified may be *conflict-minimizing* too, since positive interpretations of others' actions and cooperative (e.g.,

collaborative) behaviors typically accompany feelings of intrateam trust (cf. Kramer, 1993; Simons & Peterson, in press).

Prior work regarding how to *resolve* conflict in teams has generally been characterized by a focus on task- as opposed to emotional-conflict; this is because a focus on the latter is typically identified as dysfunctional for teamwork (e.g., Amason, 1996). An exception is the recent work of Simons and Peterson (in press), but the teams in their study were not transnational. Our emphasis regarding the importance of sensitizing TNT members to each other's *emotional boundaries*— before as well as after they are inadvertently violated— is thus a second way in which our conceptual model extends previous theorizing regarding teamwork.

The bridge we have made between the social dilemma literature and the literature on teamwork is a third way in which we extend previous theorizing regarding teamwork. Our focus on how to resolve social dilemmas in teams helped to illuminate the interventions that we have offered. Interestingly, these interventions were not offered by Bazerman et al. (1988) who, like us, noted that group members have mixed motives (Bazerman et al., 1988). This may be because the remedies that Bazerman et al. prescribed were designed to help groups obtain higher quality decisions rather than more intrateam trust and cooperation. Moreover, their prescriptions were drawn from the negotiation literature whose empirical base typically consists of citizens from a single country, the U.S. (cf. Shapiro & Von Glinow, 1999)— and therefore, of people who *share* a common native language, cultural values and customs.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When we say, “that makes sense,” we mean that incoming information is logical, or consistent with our previous ways of thinking. Ironically, in the process of describing what we

believe the trust-related sensemaking process to be in TNTs, and how it may be assisted with leader interventions, we have presented recommendations that sometimes do *not* make sense—that is, at conclusions we believe are *counterintuitive*.

In the case of leadership, we note that the role of the leader in the TNT is critical to the TNT's future functioning. Unlike the movement toward self-directed teams and even organizations, TNTs require the presence of a leader who can help set the stage for and subsequently manage the team's task-oriented accomplishments. Furthermore, the leader must manage the intricacies of the team's composition due to its cultural heterogeneity by making it acceptable to discuss emotional boundaries due to cultural differences. When speed is at a premium in terms of task accomplishment, we believe that in the special case of the TNT, speed is deleterious to trust-related sensemaking. Care must be taken to concentrate not only on the task-related components required of the TNT, but also the process-oriented issues that are magnified within the TNT due to numerous cultural differences discussed earlier. Without sufficient time spent on those emotional boundary concerns, no amount of inducement toward rapid accomplishment of the task will make sense.

Secondly, we contradict the concept of “substitutes for leadership.” There are no substitutes for TNT leadership: no task or amount of professionalism, for example can possibly substitute for the leader's interventions in emotional boundary conflict. Here, the leader is charged with some of the most challenging aspects of his/her job: manage the emotional boundaries of the TNT when a “team” norm conflicts with a “country, national or cultural” norm. It is all but impossible for someone to “step out of one's culture,” and not become offended when someone else steps upon the emotional boundary. Without a leader to actively step in and manage this situation, the TNT will atrophy. However, there are very few TNT

leaders that have sufficient skills to a priori anticipate all emotional boundary problems, and even if that were possible, then have the requisite KSAs necessary to manage their resolution. Thus, we endorse the role of the solution methodology that suggests that a methodology must be agreed upon in advance of any emotional boundary violations. This is to say, although we may not know what challenges will arise, we believe that sanitizing the actual facts, and using the episode as a discussion vehicle with relevant TNT members will allow TNT members to depersonalize, attempt to learn and understand the episode, and hopefully prevent this from occurring in the future.

Third, we challenge the concept of contingency leadership theory. Contingency theory has suggested that the situation should guide the type of leader behavior required. So, if the situation is a highly structured situation, supportive leadership is generally more suitable, and unstructured situations require more task directed leadership. Our contention is that the situation is not particularly relevant in the case of the TNT. We have already asserted that leadership is absolutely necessary, however we believe that the choice of leader behavior is contingent *not* upon the situation but upon the *people* involved. This assertion is more than semantic: the leader's style must differ depending upon which culture s/he is dealing with. Those from high power distance countries expect different behaviors from a leader than those from low power distance countries, and knowing this, the leader needs to behave differentially depending upon which people are involved. Earlier we noted, with some concern, that differential behavior may be construed as discriminatory behavior. In the U.S., for example, all employment practices are subject to EEO and other employment and labor laws. A leader cannot "discriminate" against one employee by treating him/her differently. However within the context of the TNT, we challenge the pejorative treatment of the term "differential" or "discriminatory." We do not

believe that treating someone “differently” out of respect for cultural heritage, cultural preferences, etc. is unfair labor practice; it is good leadership. Thus, we believe (again counterintuitively) that leaders should make their styles contingent, however not upon the situations involved but depending upon the people involved.

In summary, we emphasize the importance of moving away from the traditional “one size fits all” approach when leading TNTs. Furthermore, we challenge the traditional assumption in the cross-cultural literature that “universalism” and “particularism” cannot co-exist. Given the different cultural values embedded in a TMT, some particular or differential treatment clearly is warranted but it must be done in a way that adheres to universal principal of equity (i.e., meeting the differing needs of team across cultures)– any differential treatment should be done publicly and the rationale communicated to team members so that the rationale for any particularism is understood by all members. We recognize that this approach of universal particularism is counter-intuitive and potentially even discriminatory, but if these interventions are done in a way that builds and preserves trust and builds cooperation, they can be important levers for helping TNT members to work together effectively.



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