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**MINDING YOUR METAPHORS:  
APPLYING THE CONCEPT OF TEAMWORK  
METAPHORS TO THE MANAGEMENT OF  
TEAMS IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS**

**CEO PUBLICATION  
G 02-13 (422)**

**CRISTINA B. GIBSON**

*Center for Effective Organizations  
Marshall School of Business  
University of Southern California*

**MARY E. ZELLMER-BRUHN**

*Strategic Management & Organization  
Carlson School of Management  
University of Minnesota*

**July 2002**

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to the Management of Teams in Multicultural Contexts**

**Cristina B. Gibson**  
3670 Trousdale Parkway  
Center for Effective Organizations  
Marshall School of Business  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0806  
(213)740-9814  
(213)740-4354 [Fax]  
[cgibson@marshall.usc.edu](mailto:cgibson@marshall.usc.edu)

**Mary E. Zellmer-Bruhn**  
University of Minnesota  
Carlson School of Management  
Strategic Management and Organization Department  
321 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55406  
612-625-2342  
612-626-1316 [Fax]  
[mzellmer-bruhn@csom.umn.edu](mailto:mzellmer-bruhn@csom.umn.edu)

Submission to *Organizational Dynamics* Special Issue

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Managers who struggle with implementing teams across cultures can use metaphor as a tool to unlock teaming expectations and guide teaming practice. Our comprehensive cross-cultural research in five firms across four regions of the world uncovered five metaphors people use when they talk about teamwork: sports, military, family, community and associates. In this article, we describe how these metaphors illuminate a person's understanding about teamwork, and also how the language involved in the metaphor communicates their desires about teaming practices. This link, or mapping, between the language of the metaphor and the expectation for the team, helps to illustrate the manner in which team members in different cultural contexts have very different expectations about team work. We provide examples of metaphors in use based on interview excerpts, and illustrate their impact in two case studies. These illustrations suggest important techniques for using metaphor when managing teams in different cultural locations, as well as for improving the effectiveness of multi-cultural teams.

**Minding Your Metaphors:  
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**THE CHALLENGE**

At Eastman Chemical, USA, team leaders are called "coaches" and their main role is to help teams set performance goals, assist teams in resolving personnel problems, and manage upsets and emergencies. At Wilson Corporation, USA, during the annual rewards and recognition dinner, gold, silver, and bronze achievement medals are awarded to winning teams based on process improvements. At Sabre, Inc. North America, team training is administered through the "Tour de Teams" program in which teams progress along a route of programs, pass various milestones, and receive a "yellow jersey" if they are ahead of other teams.

In each of these examples, managers apply the concept of being on a sports teams to work teams with the intent to use the mental images that sports teams invoke to motivate and guide team member behavior. To many U.S. workers for whom team sports are a common part of their personal, first-hand experience, and where professional sports are a dominant national pastime, this makes a lot of sense. However, would this same concept of teamwork resonate when Eastman Chemical operates a subsidiary in Southeast Asia? Or if Sabre Inc. expands operations to Europe? Recent research suggests the answer is "no". In fact, making the language of sports the dominant tool in Asia or Europe may be confusing, de-motivating, and counter-productive. In this article we explore why this might be the case. In doing so, we demonstrate that language is a powerful tool for multinational managers and explain how it can be used to manage teams across cultures more effectively.

The issue of how to best manage teams across subsidiaries in a multinational firm becomes all the more important given the increased role of teams in new product development,

workplace innovation, and knowledge management, and the increasing degree to which these team functions are now located throughout the world, not just at U.S.- based headquarters.

Teams are a design mechanism that promotes effective collaboration, and increasingly this collaboration takes place across cultural contexts. Whether members of a team are all from one culture and must collaborate with other teams from other cultures, or if a team itself is multicultural, collaborating across cultures is challenging. Nations, organizations, and functions each have their own cultures, and representatives of these identity groups see the world in unique ways, gather and process information differently, and often have contrasting expectations and priorities. This can be a source of competitive advantage, or of dysfunctional conflict. Cultural differences often become obvious when work is conducted by teams. Teams allow for increased interaction, and help to structure interdependence between members to foster mutual accountability. During processes of communication and information exchange, members often become aware of each others' unique views and perceptions. Language in general, and metaphor in particular, plays a key role in these revelations.

### **METAPHORS FOR TEAMWORK**

Metaphors are mechanisms by which we understand our experiences. We use metaphors whenever we think of one experience in terms of another. They help us to comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning. Further, our behavior reflects our metaphorical understanding of experience. Consider for example, the following statements from workers in U.S. teams: "Among the sales people on our team, Jack is the star quarterback"; and "Our team leader acts more like a coach than a referee." These statements reflect a metaphor that could be characterized as the "Work-team-as-sports-team," metaphor. Using this metaphor involves understanding one target domain of experience (work teams) in terms of a very different source

domain of experience (sports teams). There are correspondences between aspects of a sports team (e.g., the coach, the players, the players' positions, the team's field position, the score, their ranking in the competition) and aspects of a work team (e.g., the leader, the team members, their roles, their progress, their objectives, their performance ranking in the organization). It is via such mappings that an individual in the U.S. is likely to project expectations they hold about sports teams onto the work-team domain. For example, one team member from the U.S. used the sports team metaphor when he said:

I think it's easy to have individual recognition within the team and still have a clear direction, but the team results are what's important. We have outstanding individuals on the team. And, very similar to a sports team, somebody needs to hit the home run; somebody needs to stop the ball. You know, somebody needs to catch'm and drag'm out. So I think it's a combination, but I think it's very difficult to play together as a team now. You know, we have bench players too. And we need bench players. We need the people that can get up and go fix the equipment every day.

This person's understanding of the sports metaphor will influence his expectations of leading, or participating in, a work team. In this way, metaphor goes beyond language and plays an important role in the way we think and reason and our expectations for practice and management. In fact, employees' understanding of what it means to work in a team can be identified by examining the metaphors they use when describing their team. Further, the use of the metaphors varies systematically across cultural settings.

We observed these differences while conducting research around the world between 1995 and 1998 with support from a National Science Foundation Grant. We traveled to matched facilities of six pharmaceutical firms in four different geographic areas (Europe, Southeast Asia,

Latin America and the U.S.), in total visiting over twenty different sites. For example, we visited subsidiaries of a major manufacturer of baby care and personal hygiene products in France, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. We repeated this process with each of the other firms. In each subsidiary, we conducted 1-hour interviews with team members, team leaders, and team customers. Elsewhere, we have reported the techniques we used to derive the metaphors and analyze their use. By way of summary, our first step was to develop a list of words that capture how people talked about teamwork in our interviews. Next, we asked five raters from each country involved in the study to sort them into groups they felt represented metaphors for teamwork. Through a process of discussion, negotiation, and elimination, the raters arrived at five piles, each of which represented a different metaphor: **family, sports, community, associates, and military**. Finally, we used a content analysis computer program to pull excerpts from the text database containing each term representing a metaphor. This resulted in a subtext database consisting of approximately 400 pages. We read each excerpt to determine how each term had been used, and to code what the use of each metaphor implied. As a final step, we applied ethnostatistics, in which text data is transformed into word frequency counts. We analyzed this numeric data using advanced statistical techniques to understand the systematic variation in the use of the metaphors.

#### **METAPHORS CONVEY EXPECTATIONS FOR TEAM SCOPE, ROLES , & OBJECTIVES**

A long history of previous research suggests that most people's mental image of a team include characteristics such as what a team does (activity scope), who is on the team (roles) and why the team exists (objectives). While these basic categories of characteristics may be shared across people from different cultures and settings, within each characteristic there is room for a wide variety of interpretation. For example, when some people think of a team, they picture a

project team whose activity is limited in scope to the time during which members work on the project, whereas others may picture a team more like a family whose activity is broad and extends across a number of life domains. Likewise, some concepts of teamwork may include clearly differentiated roles, such as leaders and members, whereas others may be less structured. Finally, some people define teamwork by clear outcomes; others have argued that multiple, sometimes implicit benefits can be derived from teamwork. The teamwork literature tells us that nearly all mental images people hold of teams these three elements. We used our extensive interview database to examine each of the five teamwork metaphors to determine the expectations each metaphor conveyed concerning scope, roles, objectives. Below, we explain these and offer sample quotations to illustrate the differences we found.

### **The Sports Teamwork Metaphor**

Interviewees suggested that sports teams tend to have a narrow scope, with activity limited to physical and social interaction. In other words, members of sports teams of the type most people have experienced first-hand typically only interact during practices and competitive events, and perhaps during an occasional social event. Sports teams typically have fairly clear roles, encompassing various positions on a playing field (e.g., catcher, pitcher, quarterback, center). Although there may be a coach, captain, or star player, there typically is fairly little hierarchy on sports teams. Finally, objectives are specific, with clear consequences (e.g., win or lose), and measurable, as represented by the myriad statistics maintained for a multitude of performance parameters. People who describe their work team with a sports metaphor are likely to hold these expectations for their work team. Use of the sports team metaphor is illustrated in the following quotation:



“Sports are what I’m thinking. There is a coach, and there are all these players, and among these players, there is somebody who is a very good one, a strong performer.”

### **The Military Teamwork Metaphor**

Military teams also tend to have a fairly limited scope, with activity limited to professional, physical and educational activities. There are strong hierarchically arranged roles, such as commander, second in charge, and the “rank and file” soldiers. Rank is indisputable and clearly recognized. Finally, objectives in military teams are typically extremely clear and salient, with outcomes such as life and death, survival, and defeat. There is an order about the activity in the team, in that it is fully directed at these clear objectives. Use of the military metaphor is exemplified in the following quote:

“Obviously, it's about how do I win the battle in this society. How do I survive, as opposed to, you know, what it is that I need to do to benefit everybody. [The team is] carefully measured on whether we meet objectives. Every year the company sets an annual objective and this is something that I’m going to do battle with soon.”

### **The Family Teamwork Metaphor**

Families also have clear hierarchical roles, but the “leaders” in a family (e.g., father and mother) tend to be more nurturing and caring than in a military team. Other clear roles in families mentioned by our interviewees included referring to team members as “brothers” and “sisters.” Activity in a family is the most broad in scope of all the metaphors. Family members often interact across nearly all domains in life including the domain of private life, psychological domain, physiological domains (food, shelter, clothing, safety, etc.), physical activity, socializing, entertainment, education, and in the case of a family owned business, professional activity. Finally, “objectives” in the formal sense are typically non-existent in a family. One

might make the argument that a family exists to “feed and cloth” offspring or that families struggle “to get along” but these are typically not explicit nor easily measurable goals. The family metaphor is used by the following interviewee:

“I think maybe you’ve heard it from the other people, the idea of *pakikisama* [a Filipino word meaning teamwork]. The *pakikisama* is a value of working. It’s more than friendship, it’s more, family, mother, father, brother, sister. It’s something in the team, everyone is caring for each other.”

### **The Community Teamwork Metaphor**

Like families, communities are also broad in scope, often encompassing activity across a number of domains in life, including socializing, entertainment, education, and professional activity. However, unlike a family, roles in a community are typically very informal, ambiguous, and may be shared or dynamic. Communities have goals that are somewhat more concrete than those of a family (e.g., to provide support or a safe place to live), but these objectives are not as clear and do not serve to orient all activity, as in the case of sports teams or military teams. Communities are amorphous. Boundaries are often blurred, and members come and go. This metaphor is illustrated in the following quote:

“Being a hero to your neighbors. I think that’s one way to talk about teams. And then it’s more negative than positive. People in our culture, also tend to prefer to belong to an association. Like a neighborhood association. But you can also call it, “he’s my *compadre*”, so he can’t be wrong. So right or wrong, he’s in my neighborhood.”

### **The Associates Teamwork Metaphor**

A circle of associates is the last metaphor for teamwork we identified. Associates have the most limited activity, with interaction only occurring in the professional domain. There is

some identification of roles, but there is likely to be little hierarchy, and roles may shift or be shared. Objectives in a circle of associates may be explicit, but tend to evolve and are less task oriented. Ties are based primarily on proximity and shared function. An example of this metaphor is provided by the following interviewee:

“Oh, I think the French culture is, I would say, very [indicates marching along with fingers], very directive. My team, my circle of associates, is more motivated by their own personal work performance, than by the collective discipline, surely.”

Sample expectations that coincide with each of the metaphors that we discovered are summarized in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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Having identified the various components of the five primary metaphors we uncovered in our research, we next set out to discover where each was used. We developed specific predictions about why a given metaphor may be used more frequently in one context than in another, and then tested these predictions in our interview text data-base. We summarize those findings in the next section below.

### **THE ROLE OF CULTURE: WHERE EACH METAPHOR IS USED MOST AND WHY**

Metaphors are categories in the minds of managers and workers. While these categories of meaning come from many sources, one very important source is national culture. National culture is a set of shared meanings that control behavior in that context. Cultures differ in specific ways. For example, cultures vary on power distance, or the degree to which members of a society accept and expect unequal distribution of power. Cultures low in power distance

minimize inequalities and favor less autocratic, centralized leadership. Cultures high on power distance exhibit greater tolerance for inequalities and authoritarianism. Another important work-related value that differs across cultural settings is individualism. In individualistic cultures, there are weak ties among individuals and a strong “self” concept. In collectivistic societies, personal identity is deeply tied to the in-group and there are strong connections among people.

Our interview research demonstrated that the very different cognitive frameworks existing in various cultures around the world resulted in different metaphors for teamwork and varied use of these metaphors. Specifically, our analyses indicated that particular elements of national culture such as power distance and individualism predicted use of specific metaphors. For example, individualistic interviewees used metaphors that were narrow in scope such as the sports metaphor and the associates metaphor. Sports teams typically have clearly defined domains and limited scope of involvement. In contrast, the community metaphor is broader in scope and was less commonly used by individualistic interviewees. Power distance was related to the use of metaphors with clear objectives such as the military metaphor. We summarize how the characteristics of national culture are related to use of each of the teamwork metaphors in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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A second important force likely to shape teamwork metaphors is organizational culture, which is an identifiable set of beliefs and norms shared by members of an organization or subunit. Organizational culture is a source of shared understanding and shapes the behaviors of organizational members. Researchers have demonstrated that patterns of organizational

orientations and practices can be used to explain differences in organizational cultures. Perhaps even more so, because language is an element of organizational culture, organizational culture is likely to play a role in the development of common teamwork metaphors in an organization.

For example, a performance orientation in an organization captures the degree to which an organization emphasizes achievement, service, and efficiency. In our analysis, this dimension was related to the use of metaphors that included clear consequences of team activity, such as the sport and military metaphors. A second dimension of organizational culture, degree of control, captures the extent to which people take organizational membership seriously and with reverence, the degree to which members of an organization are expected to follow rules and procedures, the extent to which punctuality is emphasized, and the degree to which the organization is cost-conscious. In our analysis, these practices were related to the use of teamwork metaphors that contain clear role information and broad scope, such as the family metaphor. We summarize how organizational culture is related to the use of the teamwork metaphors in Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 About Here

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### **ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES**

The metaphors, mappings, and corresponding expectations we have described thus far come alive when we consider their use in real, on-going teams. In this section we draw on our rich intercultural interviews to describe two scenarios in which teamwork metaphors play a critical role in team effectiveness. In the first scenario, a single manager supervises two teams. These teams are both in the same organization, and they perform the same set of tasks, but they

are located at different subsidiary locations, one in the U.S. and one in Asia. In the second scenario, we examine a virtual, multicultural, self-managing team in which team members represent both different national cultures and different organizational cultures.

### **Scenario #1: Same Team Function Different Expectations**

*What the team is, really, is the whole supply chain. I mean we start at marketing with the order or with the customer wherever we get the order from, and we end at manufacturing.*

*We don't get into there, but anything else that has to do with the product, that is us.*

*Customer service, product handling, transportation, demand planning functions, and inventory control.*

*- Fred, Director of Logistics, Photoco*

As a first example, consider two Logistic Teams each of which consists of 6 members, all responsible for logistics (i.e., receiving, warehousing and distribution) operations in a different region (e.g., one in Southeast Asia and the other in U.S.). All the members of the two Logistic Teams are employed by "Photoco," a company that develops, manufactures, sells, distributes, and services imaging equipment and support products such as film. Photoco has been struggling for several years. The organization culture is fragmented as a result of divesting and downsizing. The focus has been on cost reduction and reinforcing the traditional, established excellence of a long-standing product line.

The manager in this scenario, Fred, supervises both the Asian and U.S. Logistic Teams. Although they have the same function and are from the same organization, the team in Asia has a very different set of cultural values than the team in the U.S. The Asian team emphasizes collectivism and high power distance, while the U.S. team emphasizes individualism and low

power distance. As a result, the Asian team refers to itself as a community, using the community metaphor. For example, consider the following quote from Julia, a Filipino logistics coordinator:

“I think most Filipinos are very regionalistic. In the work place, most Filipinos would, would tend to clump together with co-town-mates or *barrio*-mates or province-mates.

They think of the team like that. That means it is a natural thing to just open up to anyone on the team. And that would be subtly felt in, let’s say, in the process of training teams.”

Coinciding with the use of this metaphor, the team members are comfortable with ambiguous informal roles, they are less task oriented, and instead focus on social opportunities, educational activities, and support of one another across all domains of activity. In contrast, the U.S. team refers to itself as a circle of associates, using the associates metaphor. For example, consider the following quote from Sam, a U.S. logistics operations specialist:

“The responsibilities, which we ask each team member hold, help us to function as if we are were a franchise, or a circle of associates. Members are given as much autonomy and freedom and empowerment as we possibly can give, to make decisions at the local level.”

In contrast to the community metaphor, this “mental picture” of a team carried with it very different expectations. Members were relatively autonomous. They interacted in a professional sense only, and did not socialize outside of the work place. Roles and responsibilities were very clear.

Because the Asian team and the U.S. team did not directly interact with one another, these different concepts of teaming, in and of themselves, are not that problematic. The turmoil occurred when their supervisor Fred attempted to manage the two teams in exactly the same manner. Fred was from the U.S., and therefore shared some of the common assumptions about teams that the U.S. Logistics Team held. The associates metaphor came naturally to him, as did

the associated expectations for roles, scope and objectives. He applied those assumptions to manage the Asian team in “cookie cutter” fashion, and as a result, met great difficulties.

The Asian team members expected much more direction from Fred than he offered. The Asian team members were disappointed with his leadership style and felt as though he wasn't doing his job adequately. They expected Fred to interact socially with the team whenever he was in the country, and to be involved with the team members at a more personal level, engaging with them about activities that extended beyond the team task. When he did not do so, they perceived his behavior (or lack of it) as insensitive and uncaring, and therefore did not trust him. When he attempted to implement changes in teamwork processes, they were skeptical and resisted. In the final analysis, the team was deemed ineffective, and Fred was counseled for poor leadership. Had Fred been aware of the concept of teamwork metaphors, and listened to the language being used by team members across the two teams, he may have been able to use the concept as a diagnostic tool. This may have helped him to avoid the difficulties he faced, as we describe below, after a description of Scenario #2.

### **Scenario #2: Multiple Multicultural Metaphors**

*"I'm very heavy on my belief in teams, the use of teams. And when I came here, I started coming up with teams that would be involved with certain activities. One of the most active ones would be the strategy team, composed of heads of all the regions."*

*- Mike, Director of Strategic Initiatives , Marketing Strategy Consortium, Pharmco*

As a second example, consider the Marketing Strategy Consortium (Team MSC), that consists of 12 members, each of whom represents a different pharmaceutical company within a variety of countries in the U.S., Central America, and Latin America. The team is a "parallel" team, meaning that it pulls people from different organizations (or jobs) to perform functions that



the regular organization structures are not well equipped to perform. Parallel teams typically have limited authority, and often make recommendations to people higher up in their respective organization. Parallel teams are often used for problem-solving and improvement activities. The objective of Team MSC is to develop a consistent marketing strategy for the industry across products and nations, in order to strengthen the overall state of the industry in the region.

The countries that members of Team MSC are from have very different cultures. Specifically, they differ in terms of the national cultural values -- individualism and power distance -- that we mentioned earlier. Latin Americans and Central Americans tend to be low on individualism and high on power distance. People in the U.S. tend to be high on individualism and low on power distance. Further, although all of the members of Team MSC are employed by organizations that develop, manufacture, sell, and distribute pharmaceutical products, these organizations differ dramatically in their organizational cultures. For example, one of the companies, Pharmco, emphasizes tight control, and clear roles and hierarchy. A second company, Healthco, on the other hand, emphasizes results and objective-driven performance, as well as flexibility and extensive autonomy for subsidiaries.

As a result of their cultural differences (both national and organizational), the members of Team MSC use a variety of metaphors for teamwork in their everyday language as they interact with each other. For example, consider Margie, a Puerto Rican director of marketing representing Pharmco. The national cultural values representative of Puerto Rico are collectivistic and the organizational culture of Pharmco emphasizes tight control. Likely as a result, Margie tends to talk about Team MSC as if it were a family. A quote that exemplifies this is:

“We are a Pharmco family. So, you can see day by day that we work “among”. Among. And if I produce a lot that goes to the next step -- that is advertising strategy - and they have problems on that stage, I have to be involved with them to make sure to correct that problem. I guess I am the mother, but there is also a father, and sisters and brothers. So, we always socialize and always work together, like a family.”

In contrast, Jack, a regional marketing manager from the U.S., represents the Healthco corporation. People from the U.S. tend to be individualistic and Healthco emphasizes performance and clear objectives. As a result, Jack describes Team MSC as a sports team. A quote that exemplified this is:

“The other thing that happens, when you say to the team, ”Okay, you’re empowered,” you can use the sports analogy, you’ll find the second baseman running out to center field to try and catch the fly ball. “You say, no, no, no, no, wait!” However, if there is a line drive out to left field and it hits the ground and he picks it up and he throws on to first base--if you ever notice at a baseball game, every time that happens, the catcher runs out from behind home plate and he gets behind -- those boundaryless things, I think, need to happen for a successful team.”

These contrasting metaphors caused real challenges on the team, because they carried very different implicit expectations in terms of roles, scope and the structuring of objectives. Margie expected that the team would be run like a family, that members would be fully involved in each others’ lives and would share in personal milestones, celebrations and concerns. She expected there to be a maternal or paternal leader. In contrast, Jack expected that the team would be more like a sports team with a focus on winning and losing, players with “positions”, and the “score.” No matter which intervention was implemented, team members were constantly in

conflict over how the team should be managed. They disagreed on basic work processes, and more fundamentally, on scope, roles and objectives of the team. Again, had the team members been aware of the metaphors they utilize, and the corresponding expectations the metaphors imply, they may have been better equipped to address the challenges of multicultural teaming.

## **USING METAPHORS IN MANAGEMENT**

As illustrated above, on a basic level, our findings suggest that the meaning of teamwork is culturally contingent. As a result, the implementation of universal team practices across subsidiaries in different countries will not work. Rather, managers can be more effective if they make the effort to identify which teamwork metaphors are likely understood and welcomed in each context. As illustrated above, in some contexts, the use of certain metaphors may be confusing, or at the extreme even insulting. Below, we describe three ways in which teamwork metaphors can be utilized in practice.

### **Matching Practices to Metaphors**

Our results have several key implications for international management practice. First, managers need to consider matching practices and actions with dominant metaphors (see again Table 1). In scenario #1, Fred failed to do this, but could have if he had been more cognizant of the metaphors being used in each of the settings. For example, the associates metaphor conveys clear information about professionalism and scope. In a setting where the associates metaphor is dominant, it may be appropriate to develop and implement very specific task definitions, and to limit work to the task context, since this is a central element in members' understanding of teamwork. Such objectives will meet members' expectations and enhance their ability to work together. Alternatively, the community metaphor does not convey as much information about goals and objectives, but instead emphasizes teams as small social support groups. If the

community metaphor is dominant, then a focus on the professionalism of the team may backfire because team members do not envision this as representative of teamwork. In this way, managers can use metaphors as a way to identify team members' expectations about their roles and the role of team.

For example, demonstrating the impact of the military metaphor one respondent in the Puerto Rico said,

"As the leader, I am supposed to be an active shooter in terms of assisting, you now, liasoning with the people and making sure that [the company's] kinds of problems are run at sort of a management level. At the moment it is very [prevalent in the] rank and file, but not really with the staff. We have not really gone to the reduction of a lot of employees. So I'm helping to do that. Right now we're having to think in terms of manpower."

In this quote, the metaphor implies prescriptions for attitudes and team behavior. Specifically, the military metaphor resulted in the belief that the leader has a clear role as conduit to upper management. Activity was directed at upward reporting of problems associated with manpower. The quote implies that teams which utilize the military metaphor will likely be more effective when managed in such a way that recognizes status relationships and incorporates these into the team structure. In the Puerto Rico, team members are likely to be more receptive to teams managed in way consistent with the military metaphor.

### **Establishing Metaphors Congruent with National and Organizational Cultures**

There is a second way that metaphors can guide practice. Intercultural research has established that organizations are more effective when management practices in a work unit are congruent with national culture. Given that multinational organizations often operate across

several cultures, these organizations face great challenges in managing teams. We argue that identifying and appropriately reinforcing particular metaphors that are congruent to and reinforce the values emphasized in a given culture is likely to have a positive impact on team effectiveness.

For example, the Philippines is a very collectivistic national context. As we suggest in Table 2, the community metaphor is consistent with collectivistic values, in that a community is broad in scope, and collective behavior encompasses many aspects of life in a collectivistic culture. Demonstrating the use of the community metaphor one respondent in the Philippines said,

"That's called a *nipa* hut. Sometimes you do require that the hut be moved from one location to another. And in the old days, *nipa* huts would probably be located along the safe side of a river because there's water there, fish would be there. Some erosion could happen and you would need to relocate the hut to a safer ground. In the Philippines, you would gather your neighbors, call them and you would put handles and literally lift the house--in one, big haul, the house as one big piece, and move it to a new location. And that's called the *bayanihan* spirit. I think that would best describe in my culture, how teams can work."

Using the same metaphor, another Filipino respondent said,

"I think most Filipinos have where they're very regionalistic, I think. That most Filipinos would, would tend to clump together with, with co-town mates or barrio mates or province mates. That, I think itself, uh, it's natural thing to just opening up to just anyone."

These excerpts demonstrate that the community metaphor shaped beliefs about who should be considered a part of a team and how central a role the team will serve in the respondents work life. Again drawing upon the rationale of cultural congruence, we would expect if a cultural assessment reveals collectivism is valued, managers who emphasize the community metaphor over other metaphor categories, because of its wide scope and its role information, will meet with more team success. Further, as implied with the community metaphor, the team will be most effective when it is defined broadly, consisting of many individuals who have some connection to each other, even if these individuals are on the periphery of the central activity of the team.

In addition to helping managers consider the choice of metaphors *among* the categories we identified (e.g. community over military), we also suggest that these results can help managers tailor choices *within* metaphor categories. We must make it clear that our work does not suggest that managers in cultural contexts such as the Philippines would be wrong to use a sports metaphor (or other metaphor conveying similar information), but rather that even *within* metaphor categories there are likely to be some choices. For example, if a manager of a Philippine team decides to use a sports metaphor to explain her expectations to the team, she would be best served by referring to a sports team that more accurately portrays the typical expectations of the country culture. Soccer may be more readily understood as the subject of a sports metaphor in Latin America than U.S. football. Soccer has much less clear hierarchy and role definition than U.S. football, for example, so in addition to familiarity because it is a national pastime in many Latin American countries, the information about scope and roles is more closely aligned with the cultural values as well.

As a result of the issues we illustrated with the US team and the Asian team and their metaphor use, a second alternative for Fred, the manager in Scenario #1, would be for him to attempt to better understand the cultural context in each country. For example, this understanding can be facilitated by measuring the cultural values mentioned in Table 2 and 3. This assessment is typically completed attitudinal measures (e.g., a survey instrument), or by discussion and observation. With cultural values and orientations identified, the manager might then encourage metaphors (both by category and within category) in each context that are consistent with the dominant cultures, using these metaphors in his own language, during communication with the team.

### **Sharing Metaphors and Building Mutual Understanding**

Finally, as illustrated in Scenario #2, research on multicultural teams suggests that a serious challenge faced by these teams is a lack of shared understanding and meaning. Having team members define their understanding of teamwork prior to commencing work may help to bridge these gaps in understanding. In this way, managers can use conscious identification and sharing of metaphors within the team as a tool to promote understanding and proactively identify sources of potential conflict within multinational teams. In contrast, no effort was undertaken in Scenario #2 to share expectations for teamwork. This may have been a key explanation for the demise of the team.

International management scholar Martha Maznevski and her colleagues suggest a three step process for sharing within multicultural teams that involves: (1) understanding differences in cultures, (2) bridging the differences, and (3) integration. To help in understanding cultural differences, we suggest that cross-cultural teams hold an initial session at their formation to discuss teamwork metaphors, and corresponding expectations about specific team behaviors

which are felt to be critical to the team's success. Each member might be asked to describe their preferred approach, identifying where problems might arise across members. From this discussion, potential problem areas could be identified along with possible solutions. This method, of course, assumes that team members are able to articulate cultural norms which in reality may not necessarily be the case. Given this dilemma, it may be useful to have an third party intervene who could advise teams at the onset what they might expect in terms of cultural differences and how these might manifest themselves in dysfunctional ways.

The second step -- bridging -- requires finding commonalities among members. A specific process that enables this is *de-centering*, defined as the process of sending and receiving communication with the other person's perspective in mind. The fundamental idea of de-centering is empathy: feeling and understanding as another person does. This may require some initial training for the team in active listening and interpersonal behavioral skills. Also in conjunction with this step, the team might consider carefully the task, objectives and priorities that comprise their mandate. It may be that certain metaphors are more appropriate for certain missions. In this way, focusing on the team's mission may help them to de-center and arrive at a shared understanding of expectations for teamwork.

The final step -- integration -- requires blame-free explanations and problem-solving. Research indicates that the single best predictor of effective group integration is team members' willingness to suspend blame for problems and to explain problems by trying to understand how members' different perspectives could have led the group as a whole to experience difficulties. This leads the team onward toward exploring alternatives and building a shared reality, developing trust and common rules, and building confidence in the team's ability to use different perceptions productively.



Another means of overcoming differences in groups is the development of a mutually agreed upon set of expectations, referred to by scholar Chris Earley and his colleagues as a “hybrid culture.” A hybrid team culture refers to a set of rules, expectations, and member perceptions that individuals within a team develop, share, and create after mutual interactions. A shared group culture appears to be important for team functioning. Shared metaphors for teamwork are likely an important component of hybrid cultures, and leaders may play a role in creating and managing hybrid cultures, by identifying key issues and points of contention around which shared understanding should be developed. In particular, managers in multinational organizations can help create hybrid cultures by bridging the home office and overseas office cultures, which can mean facilitating the proper handling of seemingly incongruent values and priorities.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The concept of teamwork metaphors advances the practice of multinational management. Due to the lack of empirical research regarding teams across cultures, leaders within multinational organizations have, up to this point, been forced to make educated guesses as to the most appropriate method of implementing teams across their various geographic facilities. Among other key insights, the concepts described here provide guidance regarding the meaning systems that must be managed in order to successfully implement teams in intercultural settings. More specifically, these ideas shed light on the impact of metaphors for teamwork, on the quality of the work experience, and the effectiveness of teams.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPY

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Table 1 Matching Practices to Metaphors

| Teamwork Metaphor | Likely to result in expectations such as....   |  |  | Objectives |
|-------------------|--|--|--|------------|
|                   | Roles  | Scope  | Objectives   |            |
| Sports            | Explicit roles such as coach and players with positions, but a relatively flat hierarchy.                          | Often limited to physical and social activity; sometimes also includes psychological domain.   | Clear and salient with outcomes such as win, lose, goals, scores, tallies, and statistics.                           |            |
| Military          | Hierarchical roles such as commander, second in charge, and soldiers, each with indisputable rank.                 | Typically limited to professional, physical, and educational activities.   | Extremely clear and salient with outcomes such as survival, life, death, defeat, occupation, or conquer.             |            |
| Family            | Hierarchical roles such as mother, father, brother and sister each with varying levels of paternalistic authority. | Very broad scope with activity covering a number of domains in life (e.g., private, psychological, physiological, physical, social, entertainment, educational, professional). | Typically non-existent, ambiguous, or inherent (e.g., “to get along” to “feed and cloth”).                           |            |
| Community         | Informal, ambiguous, and shared roles.   | Broad scope with activity including numerous domains in life (e.g., psychological, social, entertainment, educational, professional).  | Ambiguous and non-task oriented (e.g., to provide a safe environment or sense of support).                           |            |
| Associates        | Little identification of roles.  | Typically limited to professional activity.  | Sometimes explicit, but evolving, and less task oriented (e.g., to share the work load, provide back up, socialize). |            |

Table 2. Encouraging Metaphors Congruent with National Cultures

| Teamwork Metaphor | Characteristics of National Cultures Where Metaphor is Used Frequently (Understood and welcomed in these settings...) | Characteristics of National Cultures Where Metaphor is Non-Congruent (Not as well received in these settings....) |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Sports            | Individualistic settings where teams are not expected to be broad in scope (e.g., the U.S.).                          | Collectivistic settings where membership is involuntary (e.g., Scandinavia).                                      |
| Military          | High power distance settings where objectives are mandated (e.g., Latin America).                                     | Low power distance settings where objectives are ambiguous (e.g., U.S.)   |
| Family            | Collectivistic settings where teams are expected to be broad in scope (e.g., Latin America).                          | Individualistic settings where teams are not expected to be broad in scope (e.g., France).                        |
| Community         | Collectivistic settings where teams are expected to be broad in scope (e.g., Southeast Asia).                         | Individualistic settings where teams are not expected to be broad in scope (e.g., the U.K.).                      |
| Associates        | Individualistic settings where teams are not expected to be broad in scope (e.g., the U.K.).                          | Collectivistic settings where membership is involuntary (e.g., Latin America).                                    |

Table 3. Encouraging Metaphors Congruent with Organizational Cultures

| Teamwork Metaphor | Characteristics of Organizational Cultures Where Metaphor is Used Frequently (Welcomed in these settings....)   | Characteristics of Organizational Cultures Where Metaphor is Non-congruent (Not as well received in these settings....)   |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Sports            | Organizations that place an emphasis on performance (and thus have clear objectives) [e.g., Photoco (Kodak) and Medco (GE)].                                | Organizations that place an emphasis tight control (and thus have clear hierarchical roles). [e.g., Chemco (Pfizer)]  |
| Military          | Organizations that place an emphasis tight control (and thus have clear roles) or on performance (and thus have clear objectives). [e.g., Pharmco (Merck)]. | Organizations that emphasize loose control and empowerment (and thus emphasize shared roles) [e.g., Healthco (J&J)]   |
| Family            | Organizations that emphasize tight control (and thus have clear roles). [e.g., Chemco (Pfizer) and Pharmco (Merck)].  | Organizations that emphasize performance (and thus have clear objectives). [e.g., Photoco (Kodak)]  |
| Community         | Organizations that emphasize loose control (and thus have shared roles) [e.g., Photoco (Kodak) and Medco (GE)].   | Organizations that place an emphasis tight control (and thus have clear hierarchical roles) or those that emphasize performance (and thus have clear objectives). [e.g., Pharmco (Merck)] |
| Associates        | Organizations that emphasize loose control (and thus have shared roles) [e.g., Healthco (J&J)].   | Organizations that place an emphasis tight control (and thus have clear hierarchical roles) [e.g., Pharmco (Merck), Biomedco (SKB)]   |