

# Coaching culturally different members of international business teams – the role of cultural intelligence

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## 1. Objectives

**T**HIS ARTICLE aims to provide insights into the vital role of cultural sensitivity when coaching international teams.

The objectives of the article are to:

- i. share research findings on international team-member perspectives of Team Coaching (TC);
- ii. demonstrate the value to team coaches of greater awareness of cultural difference and working with cultural sensitivity during International Team Coaching (ITC);
- iii. suggest areas for further consideration by team coaches who wish to develop greater cultural sensitivity.

The findings reported here are based on the perspectives of 22 participants, who are senior leaders, working as members of international teams, for a single global business consultancy. The participants are based in Czechia, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Singapore, South Africa and the United States, so provide a wide geographic scope for the research. The study shares their varied perspectives on coaching, working in teams and how to approach cultural difference.

## 2. Introduction

The acronym VUCA, standing for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity, first used in the context of modern warfare towards the end of the 20th century (Lawrence, 2013), is now a commonplace descriptor for the unpredictable environment of global business. Downes &

Nunes (2013) propose that competitors, new-entrants and/or substitution offerings generate **Volatility** in markets, requiring frequent adjustment to operating models. Global **Uncertainty** is apparent in new and changing global risks that businesses face. These risks may arise from a number of factors including economic, technological, environmental, societal or geopolitical (World Economic Forum, 2019). The emergence of megatrends including the shift of economic power from West to East, climate change, resource scarcity and rapid urbanisation are widely seen to have increased global business **Complexity** (EY, 2019; PwC, 2019). Finally, the potential for **Ambiguity** is driven by the exponential growth of knowledge, increasing cross-cultural perspectives and decreasing individual attention spans, that have contributed to doubts about the accuracy and shared interpretation of business knowledge (Cousins, 2018).

Responses to the challenges of a VUCA environment include changes in business models of leadership, with a recognition, at least in academic circles, that belief in a single omnipotent, 'superhero' leader is unrealistic (de Vries, 2011: 56). In contrast to the earlier years of the 21st century, when executive coaching focused on the development of individuals (Stokes & Jolly, 2018), there is a growing focus on the potential of TC to develop leadership teams (Lawrence & Whyte, 2017). However, there is a lack of empirical studies of TC (O'Connor et al., 2017; Rapp et al., 2016; Peters & Carr, 2013).

In particular, the perspectives of recipients of TC (the team members with whom team coaches work) and the perspectives of international teams made up of culturally different team members, appear to have been neglected.

This article reports on the findings of a study that investigated what culturally different members of international teams see as the benefits of working with a team coach. It starts with a review of the relevant literature, including materials on TC, ITC and cultural difference, followed by discussion of the research method and results of the study. Research findings are shared in the contexts of the literature, and four research questions shown below.

The Discussion section reflects on the research findings, before proposing potential benefits for team coaches from furthering their awareness of cultural sensitivity, and identifies further allied concepts that may help them to do so.

**3. Literature review**

**3.1 Teams**

The use of teams in business organisations has increased over the last 30 years (Lawler et al., 1995). In response to increasing complexity, for example the ‘Knowledge Revolution’ (Kessles, 2004), and to facilitate greater scale (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993), businesses have adopted organisational design models built on matrix and network approaches that envisage people

working together (de Vries, 2011). Clarity about the characteristics that distinguish a ‘team’ from the wider term ‘group’ is helpful in both organisational design and in setting parameters for TC. A team may be distinguished by being an identifiable set of team members (Cordery & Tian, 2017), working with shared purposes (Salas et al., 2017), for a finite time period (Thornton, 2016). Each team-member needs a clearly defined and understood role that changes iteratively as shared awareness of the team’s evolving purpose develops (Hawkins, 2018).

Fuller understanding of individual team roles and overall team purpose may be gained by making the necessary time and emotional investment to develop deeper trust amongst team members (Hawkins, 2017). Lencioni (2002, p.92) suggests that teams are more likely to achieve their purpose by being open and honest with one another, engaging in ‘unfiltered conflict’ and avoiding the pursuit of ‘artificial harmony’, so as not to impede understanding. Teams may also be impeded by a lack of attention to group dynamics (Garland, 2010), an unwillingness to attend to the consequences of how groups form, how group working affects individual members and the impact of individual and collective subconscious behaviours (Bion, 1961). The wider use of teams in increasingly complex business environments sits uncomfortably next to Thornton’s comment that:

**Table 1: Research Questions**

<b>Purposes</b>	RQ 1: What do participants see as the purposes of International Team Coaching?
<b>Attitudes</b>	RQ 2: To what extent, if any, do individual cultural differences influence attitudes towards International Team Coaching?
<b>Practice</b>	RQ 3: What skills might international team coaches practice to better serve culturally different clients?
<b>Western Model</b>	RQ 4: To what extent is a largely Western model of International Team Coaching appropriate to working with culturally different team-members?

*‘...our general ignorance of the dynamics and principles of group life, at least at the conscious level is remarkable.’ (2016, p.5)*

Where teams spend less time building awareness, understanding and trust, team members will need to infer more about their fellow members and the team’s purpose, based on untested assumptions (Izod & Whittle, 2014). Such inferences increase the likelihood of team members reaching different individual, rather than team, views of what is required. Once these have been established, they can become obstacles to team working, if invested with personal ownership and identity. An understanding of how coaching can facilitate the development of awareness, understanding and trust in teams is important.

### **3.2 Team Coaching (TC)**

TC was introduced as a distinctive developmental approach (Peters & Carr, 2013) some 15 years ago (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Its originality lay in the attention to the functions a team coach performs when coaching and to understanding the conditions needed for TC to succeed. However, as an early TC proponent has recognised, there is a lack of agreement about what TC is (Clutterbuck, 2014). A proliferation of differences in the views of writers on TC has resulted in a long list of themes in TC definitions, and little effort to distinguish TC from other development interventions (Jones et al., 2019).

TC themes that are widely shared include how to raise the collective performance of teams (Clutterbuck, 2007; Hawkins, 2011), and the importance of seeing teams within a system (Peters & Carr, 2013; Giffard & Moral, 2015). In contrast, contradictory views are offered for whether TC should be restricted to coaching only the complete team (Dassen, 2015), or, in addition, include individual coaching for team members (de Vries, 2011). A further difference arises over whether TC should facilitate learning within the team. Here the debate is between focusing more on the primacy of the

team’s immediate purpose (Hawkins, 2017) and the value of team members learning more about effective teamwork for current and future use (Brennan & Hellborn, 2016). For both differences, this article favours the broader developmental approaches. This more closely follows ethical guidance that coaching develops and enhances individuals and organisations (APECS, 2019), and the importance of giving weight to the context in which the coaching is delivered (Bossons & Sartain, 2014). As TC approaches develop internationally, addressing wider cultural difference, greater attention to the context of each assignment may enhance the effectiveness of the intervention. For example, team coaches may need to do more to demonstrate the fundamental coaching principle of avoiding assumptions (de Haan, 2008) and give more attention to levels of ‘capacity building’ offered to culturally different team members (Britton 2015, p.119).

### **3.3 International Team Coaching (ITC)**

Team coaches have recognised that working with international teams ‘...magnifies the coach’s challenge...’ (Petersen, 2007, p.264), raises the potential for team conflict and makes greater demands on the time a team needs to build shared meaning systems and a sense of team identity (Clutterbuck, 2007). Conflict may arise as early in the process as agreeing how team members will communicate with one another. For example, the working practices of team members from France, described as a ‘high-context’ culture in which face-to-face communication is highly valued, differ from ‘low-context’ cultures, such as Germany, that are more likely to favour formal written communication (Rosinski, 2003). Other aspects of the coaching context may also add to the challenge and potential conflict. For example, where ITC is conducted virtually, it may reduce the capacity of team members and coaches to use all their senses for deeper awareness of what they are experiencing (Allan & Whybrow, 2008). Alternatively, the coaching context may reduce the

coach's potential to optimise synchronous feedback for each team-member. Asynchronous feedback for example using email and social media messaging, offers less potential for immediate personal development than coaching face-to-face or using real-time video-conferencing (Hooreman et al., 2008).

Levi (2015) proposes that greater time investment will allow international teams to build their collective capabilities by drawing on team members' individual resources, to enhance the team's potential to work through possible conflict, create team identity and share team meaning systems. Where there is a lack of attention to these factors, building effective team rapport may be hampered by '...miscommunication, misunderstanding and conflict.' (St Claire-Oswald, 2007, p.49).

The team coach role can be vital in helping international team members to see the advantages and disadvantages of spending time building the team's identity, meaning system and purpose. Several aspects of both positive and negative team behaviour such as desire for status, wish for control and rivalry, may be displayed in culturally different ways that may be unfamiliar or unseen by some fellow team members which the team coach will need to consider. This is challenging for coaches in the absence of an awareness of cultural difference (Wilson, 2013). Team members from different cultures may be familiar with different approaches to control. For example, the Dutch are more familiar with control through consensus; Americans through visible individual achievements and wealth; Danes through technical competence and the French through education (Lewis, 2018). Fang et al. (2018), have suggested that the greater complexity that arises from working with cultural difference means that coaches need to be particularly alert to the effects of such differences. For example, there may be effects upon psychological wellbeing due to stress that arises when someone is working in an unfamiliar cross-cultural situation. Experience and comfort in working with uncertainty,

and awareness of personal limitations and emotional biases, will be valuable to coaches working with such challenges.

### 3.4 Cultural difference

Cultural difference can be analysed at three levels. A first level of understanding comes from paying attention to different tangible and observable behaviours. For example, stereotypically the French take two hours for lunch (so they can get to know their colleagues better), they do not eat at their desks like Americans (to maximise productive time), nor drink milk like the Dutch. This level of analysis simply observes the differences, offering no explanation of why they occur. Rather, it may be important to focus on deepening individual understanding of such differences. To do this requires individuals to be:

*'...more consciously and self-critically aware of the assumptions that underlie our habitual responses and modes of interaction...our cultural baggage.'* (St-Claire Ostwald, 2007, p.49).

A second and deeper level of understanding comes from explanatory models of cultural difference (Lewis, 2018 – see Appendix 1; Hofstede, 2019 – see Appendix 2). For example, the positioning of countries on the Individualism Dimension of Hofstede's model measures the degree of interdependence that different societies maintain among members. These models offer a mechanism to explain the observable differences in behaviours across cultures such as the deference for authority found in cultures with an emphasis on hierarchical structure. However, they suffer from ethnocentricity in their design. For example, the GLOBE Model (House et al., 2004) uses *assertiveness* as a distinguishing concept, a word for which there is no direct translation in Mandarin (Plaister-Ten, 2018).

More recent attempts to understand cultural difference have introduced a third level focused not on what is happening in

separate cultures, but on single universal approaches for working with cultural difference, that can be used by people from all cultures (Earley & Ang, 2003). These approaches demand similar levels of attention to cultural difference of all, reducing the potential in teams for bias towards the practices of a dominant cultural group. The approaches also address van Nieuwenburgh's (2016) concern that coaches avoid positioning themselves as different in the eyes of the team. At this third level, a universal approach to understanding cultural difference is employed by all team members, without reference to their own culture background. This has the advantage of offering a single method to facilitate team understanding. Deeper understanding of culturally different team members and the team's coach(es) is achieved by looking at shared behaviours, with less attention given to different behaviours.

### **3.5 Cultural difference in coaching**

Coaching practice has been developed largely from a Western perspective (Grant, 2018; Milner et al., 2013). Research into coaching practice in different parts of the world has mostly consisted of asking contributors to provide personal views on the practice of coaching in their country (Blackman et al., 2018; Passmore, 2013). This has largely confirmed that different countries highlight different aspects of coaching, that are largely consistent with the dimensions identified in the cultural difference models. For example, the UK is seen as having a non-directive coaching approach (Tulpa & Bresser, 2013) which is consistent with a strong cultural leaning towards Hofstede's Individualism Dimension (2019). Similarly, Thai coaching practice is viewed as courteous and self-effacing (Carter-Scott, 2018) in line with Hofstede's Femininity Dimension.

Researching coaching practice, using a purely Western approach, (i.e. asking how what the West views as coaching is practiced in other cultures) may generate an incomplete and distorted approach to under-

standing coaching's international potential (Chatwani, 2015). A broader approach is to ask what practices in different cultures serve a similar function to that served by coaching in the West. This allows for the possibility that cultures with long established collectivist approaches have developed relevant cultural practices that perform similar societal functions, but that these would not be considered in a coaching context in the West. For example, Western coaches familiar with high levels of personal development in the workplace, may notice the absence of similar levels of development in the Chinese workplace without recognising that, for example, in China, personal development is more founded on serving the family and the country (Ng, 2013).

In this regard, it is interesting to note that research in the West is much more focused on business coaching, compared to the East, where there is a preponderance of studies on coaching in other fields such as nursing (Han et al., 2016). Similarly, the traditional Maori practice of *Kaiarahi*, defined as 'operating in a minimal fashion to ensure empowerment for the other(s)' (Fudge, 2018: 117), suggests a long history of a practice similar to positive regard (Rogers, 1961) which is one of Western coaching's defining principles. The African concept of *Ubuntu*, which defines an individual in terms of his relationship with others, has principles applicable to wider TC, such as collective ownership (Geber & Keane, 2013).

Western practitioners have been criticised for developing approaches that are narrowly focused on a single cultural approach and then applying them more widely without adaptation (Dickson et al., 2012). Chatwani (2015) is particularly critical of Western perspectives that see coaching as a new approach, contrasting this with the long-established *Guru-sisya*, Indian approach to wellbeing, self-actualisation and personal growth of the disciple, learned through patience, listening, observation and practice. The limitations of working only with a Western model risk either limiting

the cross-cultural application of coaching, and thereby weakening its potential to support culturally different teams, or requiring culturally different team members to compromise their normal cultural behaviours which poses a challenge to building team-member trust in the team. For this reason, we have included the Western model as a research question (RQ 4).

Research into cross-cultural coaching practice has largely been limited to single culture studies. Two studies with the promising words 'cross-cultural' in their title provide limited cross-cultural insight. One study (Popescu et al., 2014) is limited as 118 of the 125 participants are French nationals and therefore of similar cultural background, with a further 3 participants from French speaking countries. The other study (Milner et al., 2013) reports on work exclusively with German coaches concluding that:

*'Experts from other cultural backgrounds might have experienced the situations differently.'* (p.29)

Noer (2005) provides a cross-cultural perspective based on Western coaches working with individuals in the Middle East, concluding that cross cultural coaching requires questioning of personal values and trusting others. Therefore, this research sought to learn more about the relatively unexplored areas of cultural difference in ITC.

#### **4. Research method**

In order to address the research objectives, a research design was created to collect cross-sectional data about the emic experiences and practices of culturally different participants whose daily work required them to work in global client service teams and so were working in ITC situations. To this end an interpretivist, qualitative approach was adopted in the research design.

The four research questions (see Table 1) were developed in order to guide the design and implementation of the research.

#### **4.1 The sample**

The research sought to investigate the views of culturally different members of international business teams in respect of the benefits of working with a team coach. The unit of analysis therefore was individuals working within international teams. Countries were selected in order to provide a geographic spread with participants drawn from contrasting cultures based on Lewis's Cultural Types Model (Lewis, 2018) and Hofstede's Dimensions Model (Hofstede, 2019). Under the Lewis model (Appendix 1), countries were distinguished based on their positioning as linear-active, multi-active and reactive providing two countries for each category. Using Hofstede (Appendix 2), countries were drawn from their mapping across the six dimensions of Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity/Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation and Indulgence.

The researchers approached a global business consultancy with which one researcher had worked. A country co-ordinator was identified at each location based on their experience of working internationally and organisational seniority. In turn, country co-ordinators were asked to independently identify senior-level participants, working regularly in cross cultural teams, who had grown up in the country or had worked there for at least five years. This ensured that each participant had a thorough knowledge of the culture in which they were working. 28 candidates were approached to participate in the research, with 22 (79 per cent) agreeing to take part.

Table 2 overleaf lists the country and characteristics of each participant in the sample.

**Table 2: Sample Profile Characteristics**

Country and Reference Number	Gender	Country of Origin	Age Group	Role Level	Years working in research country	Years with IBC	Other countries worked in for 3 months or more
Czechia 1	Male	Slovakia	Gen X	1	8	8	Slovakia
Czechia 2	Female	Czechia	Gen X	3	Career to date	4	None
Czechia 3	Male	Czechia	Gen X	1	Career to date	14	None
Hong Kong 1	Male	UK	Gen X	1	14	30	UK, Singapore
Hong Kong 2	Male	Malaysia	Gen X	1	Career to date	19	None
Hong Kong 3	Male	Hong Kong	Gen X	1	Career to date	20	None
Hong Kong 4	Female	China	Gen X	1	Career to date	16	China
Kazakhstan 1	Female	Kazakhstan	Gen X	2	11	11	Switzerland
Kazakhstan 2	Female	Kazakhstan	Gen X	3	9	9	Russia
Kazakhstan 3	Female	Kazakhstan	Gen X	3	Career to date	10	USA
Singapore 1	Female	Singapore	BB	2	Career to date	10	None
Singapore 2	Male	UK	Gen X	2	10	18	UK, Russia
Singapore 3	Male	India	Gen X	2	Career to date	17	India
Singapore 4	Female	USA	BB	1	11	24	USA, Indonesia
South Africa 1	Female	South Africa	Gen X	3	10	10	None
South Africa 2	Female	South Africa	Gen X	3	16	16	USA
South Africa 3	Male	South Africa	Gen X	1	16	16	USA
South Africa 4	Male	South Africa	BB	2	35	35	UK, Netherlands
South Africa 5	Male	UK	Gen X	1	18	25	UK
USA 1	Male	USA	Gen X	1	Career to date	28	None
USA 2	Female	USA	BB	1	Career to date	32	None
USA 3	Male	USA	BB	1	Career to date	21	None

**Participants per country:**

Czechia: 3 (14%); Hong Kong: 4 (18%); Kazakhstan: 3 (14%); Singapore: 4 (18%); South Africa: 5 (22%); United States: 3 (14%).

**Key:**

**Role Level:** 1: Business Leader; 2: Senior Executive; 3: Senior Manager.

**Age Group:** BB: Baby Boomer born in 1964 or before; Gen X: Generation X born in 1965 or later.

**IBC:** International Business Consultancy.

## 4.2 Data collection

The data collection technique utilised was individual semi-structured interviews. All interviews were audio recorded on a Digital Dictation Machine and, for the 20 participants who chose to do so, conducted using video conferencing. After reference to each participant's earlier written confirmation of informed consent, and collection of personal data (see Table 2), a pre-determined interview plan was used to ask each participant to talk about their experiences of coaching, both as a coachee and where applicable as a coach, and of working in domestic and international teams. Participants who talked knowledgeably about their experiences of TC were encouraged to expand on their perspectives and share their views on the Practice and Attitudes research questions. Participants who talked tentatively about TC, for example those who said that their experience of TC was limited and/or asked for a definition of TC, were asked to share their perspectives on working in teams, before hearing different definitions of TC from Hackman & Wageman (2005), Clutterbuck (2007), Wageman et al. (2008) and Hawkins (2017) and asked to comment on them.

Participants were asked to provide perspectives from their own culture, for example, Ubuntu was raised with each South African participant. Participants were encouraged to express themselves freely, for example by asking more open questions, and were supported to develop their own views. For example, where participants asked for a definition of TC, they were told first that their personal definition was the most valid for the purposes of the interview. The four key ethical principles of avoiding participant harm or loss of dignity, transparency and honesty, the right to privacy and researcher integrity (Rose et al., 2015) were observed.

## 4.3 Data processing

The researchers transcribed the audio tapes adopting a denaturalised transcription which, in addition to recording what was said, captures meanings and perceptions

stated during the interviews by participants. Oliver, Serovich & Mason (2005) recommend the use of a denaturalised approach as particularly apt for cross-cultural work given the greater potential for misunderstanding participants and drawing ethnocentric conclusions.

The data was analysed by one of the researchers, using a manual qualitative matrix which recorded what was said by participants from each country in relation to different themes used by participants. For example, the South African matrix shares common headings for personal experiences of coaching and TC, and working with colleagues from different cultures, and a specific heading for Ubuntu. Participants comments under each heading were then analysed to draw out themes from each country.

## 5. Research findings

This section shares research findings, first by comparing the differences across the sample by country and then by summarising these findings as they relate to each research question.

### 5.1 Sample differences

Key differences emerged from the sample including variations in the perceived purposes and experiences of Coaching and TC. The following tables show differences in the main themes raised by participants representing each country.

Coaching was described as instruction in Singapore and as a tool for on-the-job development in South Africa (Table 3). This contrasts with US participants who all referred to coaching as a tool used over an extended time period for individual development. US participants referred frequently to coaching concepts including the coach holding up a mirror to the team and as a technique for facilitating self-discovery (Table 4).

Table 3: Participants' Comments on Team Coaching Experience

Czechia	Hong Kong	Kazakhstan
Positive views about TC, particularly in more complex teams, for example teams with different age groups.	Few views about the use of TC with suggestions that hierarchical leadership has greater influence. Comments on the high level of attention given to defining individual roles in teams.	No mention of having worked with a team coach – references to hierarchical leadership approaches and need for certainty provided by a clear leader.
Singapore	South Africa	USA
Communication for teams is typically practiced by working with team-members on an individual basis rather than with the whole team.	Teams operate more for information sharing and are largely hierarchical – incidences of TC are uncommon.	Higher level issues e.g. helping leaders to take a back seat and holding up a mirror to poor team behaviours were raised.

Table 4: Participants' Comments on the Domestic Use of Individual Coaching

Czechia	Hong Kong	Kazakhstan
Market is developing, hampered by a belief that Czech leaders see coaching as remedial rather than as a positive development intervention.	Participants primarily referred to coaching in relation to performance review processes rather than as e.g. a way of facilitating the generation of fresh ideas.	All participants mentioned stronger non-work coaching relationships, that were of much greater value than workplace development support.
Singapore	South Africa	USA
A clear divide between participants who sought coaching for instruction and those who had spent time working in the West and looked for a coach to help create new ideas and perspectives.	Seen more as a tool for on-the-job development and training. Used most frequently in anticipation of significant promotions.	Coaching used widely in the workplace. Each participant had been supported in seeking personal coaches to address their individual coaching needs over an extended time period.

Participants commented:

*'In Asia or at least in Singapore, they expect a coach to be telling them what to do, help them progress, lead the way.'*  
Singapore 4

and:

*'When we say coaching a lot of it is more training than coaching.'* South Africa 5

Czech and Kazakh participants (four in total) had developed their awareness of coaching outside their workplaces and were enthusiastic about how this had benefited them compared to office coaching:

*'There is a difference between 'real coaching' for personal development and 'fake coaching' to achieve business goals.'* Kazakhstan 1

Individual experiences of TC ranged from none (more frequent in Hong Kong,

**Table 5: Participants' Comments on Approach to Working in International Teams**

Czechia	Hong Kong	Kazakhstan
Participants are energised by working with international colleagues, consciously seeking others' ideas, and by understanding different cultural approaches.	Contributions may not be immediate due to fear of losing face, and anticipation that effective decision making may have taken place before the meeting.	Participants seek higher levels of direction and psychological safety to build trust, and expect clear structure and direction from those chairing meetings.
Singapore	South Africa	USA
Participants feel that they work in a cosmopolitan environment and see working cross-culturally as a straightforward extension of working domestically.	Addressing high levels of domestic cultural difference has provided cultural sensitivity when working with others, and heightened sensitivity to the weaknesses of ethnocentricity.	Approach to working with cultural difference likened to working with colleagues in various parts of US. All participants were curious to understand much more than country stereotypes.

**Table 6: Participants' Comments on Working with an International Team Coach**

Czechia	Hong Kong	Kazakhstan
Valuable role for international team coach in helping all to avoid using country stereotypes and untested assumptions about others.	Team leaders consistently expressed frustration with the lack of individual team member contributions and were positive about the potential of coaching to help achieve this.	See role for team coaches in giving attention to tolerance, flexibility and sincerity which were identified as vital elements of building trust.
Singapore	South Africa	USA
Participants would value the ability of team coaches to adapt a team's approach to the specific cultural requirements of individual team-members and the team as a whole.	Support for the potential for TC to enhance cultural interaction and understanding. Value seen for working domestically as well as internationally.	Scope for team coach to address others' fears of imposing a dominant US viewpoint on others, and supporting deepening team-members' relationships and trust.

Kazakhstan and South Africa) to extensive (US).

All participants were asked to share their perspectives on working in international teams (Table 5) and what benefits a team coach could bring to this (Table 6). Singaporeans, Americans and South Africans drew little distinction between working domestically and working internationally. Singaporeans based this on their familiarity with a domestic cosmopolitan environment,

Americans on the experience of working with inter-State cultural differences, and South Africans based on their domestic experience of a high level of attention to working with cultural difference.

The greatest concerns about the contrast between domestic and international working (Table 7) were expressed by Hong Kongese participants who all referred to a heightened fear of losing face in an international environment.

Table 7: Participants' Comments on Cultural Perspectives

Czechia	Hong Kong	Kazakhstan
Legacy of Soviet influence lingers seen, for example, in a tendency to make quick judgments based on limited and unverified information.	Representatives at international meetings may be chosen based on familiarity with Western cultural behaviour, and may not represent all aspects of domestic approach.	Participants said that they find it hard to get to know foreigners who they see as comparatively slow to open up, being more focused on transactional areas.
Singapore	South Africa	USA
There is a reluctance to be openly critical of others, and to receive negative criticism in public. Helping others and using cultural sensitivity are highly valued.	Concern for others captured by 'The rainbow nation is always at the back of your mind' indicating the value placed on sensitivity towards others.	Americans may be comparatively direct with their colleagues, which they see as helping to meet deadlines, recognising that this can hinder creativity, diversity of thought and open expression.

*'The art of a team coach [in Hong Kong] would be in extracting the participation. In the UK a coach could ask one question and everyone in the room would share an opinion on it.'* Hong Kong 1

Czech participants discussed their excitement at hearing new ideas from international colleagues and were most positive about having their domestic thinking challenged, whereas Kazakh participants indicated their need for clear leadership, and structure to support their work in an international environment.

The most common feedback on the benefits a team coach can offer referred to building trust, focusing the team on its purpose, and enhancing cultural sensitivity (all countries).

*'The focus of the team coach for the Senior Leader group was to pry us open culturally and also make us realise we have the same target, goal, objective, we just see it differently.'* Singapore 4

*'There is an expectation of what is happening in our office based on what is happening in your office.'* South Africa 1

Kazakh participants emphasised the need to build trust through tolerance, sincerity and flexibility and that they are uncomfortable where these elements are lacking.

The authors recognise that the number of comments on cultural understanding may be a reflection of the attention given to cultural difference in the participant interviews.

American participants felt that a team coach could help to reduce dominant US bias in the team, and emphasised the need for team coach flexibility.

*'You cannot imagine how difficult it was to get the US guys to understand that they were going to take a back seat to those countries and not be in charge.'* USA 1

*'To come up with a working hypothesis is totally acceptable but [be] flexible enough to change and modify and make it stronger as you obtain more evidence.'* USA 3

Czech and American participants expect to contribute to content discussions, whereas Kazakh, Singaporeans and Hong Kongese participants expect direction from a team leader.

*'I think the leader of the group is responsible'. (Answering: Who would you say is responsible for the disconnection in the team) Kazakh 3*

The value of the coach's attention to group dynamics was mentioned most frequently by Singaporean participants, who also made the most references to reflection (three out of four participants). The value of reflection was mentioned by just under half the total sample.

Czech participants prefer to ask open questions and reflect before reaching an understanding, whereas South African participants respect directness in achieving clarity. Mixed views were shared about the competing needs for coaches to support the team in achieving its specific purpose (Hong Kong), and on enhancing wider team-member development (Czechia and Singapore). Hong Kongese seek clear definitions of narrower individual roles within the team, rather than shared team responsibility favoured by Americans and South Africans.

*'...if assigned a task to one particular person, he or she can do the job fantastically. If you put them into a team... I need to make sure that each and every one of the team members know what role they are performing –when you have a team meeting and just ask open questions, 9 out of 10 times there will be silence...' Hong Kong 2*

Emergent themes included the difficulty of communicating comfortably when speaking a foreign language (Hong Kong, Czechia and Kazakhstan), negative cultural attitudes to female business women (South Africa and Kazakhstan), and a cultural tendency to show higher respect to foreigners (Kazakhstan). Czech participants referred to the enduring legacy of Soviet influence saying that this still encourages Czechs to quick judgment based on limited and unverified information. A Hong Kongese participant referred to the practice of selecting national

representatives for global meetings based on their familiarity with Western culture.

Other themes suggested the relevance of understanding and learning from different cultural practices. South African participants highlighted the need to comply with domestic legal requirements for positive racial discrimination in the composition of leadership teams. Another South African theme was the importance of senior staff demonstrating support for each individual's home situation and challenges such as low income and difficulty in getting to and from work, but without too much interference. Hong Kongese participants offered insights into how asynchronous use of social media has become more common in China and Hong Kong for communication in internal teams, with client teams, and for team performance management, with one adding:

*'They like emojis to express themselves – more frequent and short works better than long conversations.'* Hong Kong 3.

## 5.2 Research findings

The next sub-section uses the participants' perspectives detailed in Tables 3–7 and the previous sub-section 5.1 and relates them to the four research questions.

### 5.2.1 RQ 1: What do participants see as the purposes of team coaching?

The research findings, which are taken mainly from Tables 3 and 4, indicate little consistency in how participants' see the purposes of coaching and by extension TC. Those most aware of TC, shared clear views of what TC is and were most consistent with practitioners' views. They value coaching and TC as distinct workplace interventions. Those with some awareness of coaching were able to apply their knowledge to talk about perceived values of TC. A third sub-group saw the purpose of coaching as supporting more directive processes such as performance review and assessment.

### **5.2.2 RQ 2: To what extent, if any, do individual cultural differences influence attitudes towards team coaching?**

The findings, which are taken mainly from Tables 3 and 5, point to marked cultural differences in attitudes towards TC. Although other influencing factors have emerged from the research, with the most positive comments on TC expressed by those with most knowledge and experience, the influence of cultural difference was seen in the responses of participants who had spent significant time working in more than one country (e.g. Hong Kong 1, Singapore 2, Singapore 4, South Africa 5 – see Table 2). Each of these participants was able to contrast time spent working in different cultures and the impact this had on working in teams and, in some cases working with a team coach.

### **5.2.3 RQ 3: What might international team coaches practice to better serve culturally different clients?**

Participants' suggestions, taken mainly from Tables 6 and 7, regarding the skills required of an international team coach were as follows: building trust, focusing the team on its purpose, displaying cultural sensitivity, being flexible, attending to group dynamics, allowing time for reflection, providing a suitable level of direction for each team-member, consideration of individual language capability, and treatment of all team members with similar respect regardless of gender and cultural background.

### **5.2.4 RQ 4: To what extent is a largely Western model of team coaching appropriate to working with culturally different team members?**

The research findings, drawn mainly from Tables 6 and 7, indicate concerns about the use of unadapted Western models of TC for work with culturally different team members. Three types of concern were identified: first the challenge of having to behave differently, second, uncertainty about the suitability of unfamiliar approaches, and finally, exclusion

of what has worked in the past. Participants commented on these areas in turn:

*It is quite challenging to switch off the Singaporean brain and switch on the organisation brain and behave in a way, a very different way...* Singapore 2

*'...when you apply them in Singapore context, it doesn't work that way, because the context and the environment you are trying to apply them in is totally different, so sometimes I use these with a pinch of salt...*' Singapore 3

*'We work on personal experience of what has worked well and what is likely to work well going forward and it is no different to other countries.'* South Africa 3

Singapore 3 went on to give clear advice to those seeking to introduce unadapted models that work well in one culture to another culture:

*Parachuting something which works in Europe into any of these countries would be a folly, an absolute folly.* Singapore 3

Participants from Kazakhstan, Czechia and South Africa also saw the need to position coaching positively:

*I did not have courage...to ask for [coaching]. Because the attitude from leadership is such that it is a waste of time if you need a coach – it's not a good position.'* Czechia 1

Despite this resistance, participant feedback provided encouragement for the potential benefits of adapting Western models of TC, suggesting more attention to how current models can be adapted to achieve wider cultural acceptance.

*I think there is a huge opportunity. International teams are looking at how it works today.'* Czechia 2

*'We definitely need it in the future if it is going to be way more international. Very helpful if we can make it work.'* South Africa 1

## 6. Discussion

The research findings provide details of the range of benefits that culturally different members of international teams may seek from a team coach. This section seeks to demonstrate the value to team coaches of developing cultural sensitivity before suggesting areas of potential interest for those who wish to do so.

### 6.1 The value of cultural sensitivity

Greater awareness of cultural sensitivity will help coaches to build trust and rapport with culturally different team members. Where coaches can demonstrate their openness to knowing more about the potential of each team member's contribution, this will facilitate team members in offering more to the team. Coaches may also be able to role model ways of working that influence team members to consider how their individual cultural approaches can be adapted for the needs of the whole team.

Adopting a culturally sensitive approach, addresses concerns raised by study participants and in the literature review. Greater cultural sensitivity appeared to be required for example by the Singaporean participants seeking identification of common team goals when starting from culturally different initial positions, which is recognised in the literature (Milner et al., 2013). Avoiding the perception of cultural imposition, as seen in Chatwani's (2015) dismissal of the novelty of Western coaching approaches and the Singaporean participant's advice to avoid parachuting in European solutions, also points at the need for cultural sensitivity.

The value of cultural sensitivity can be seen in the light of the importance that coaches and their clients place on coaches being sensitive. Based on the research, we propose that cultural sensitivity is a valuable addition to working with international teams with culturally different team members.

### 6.2 Developing cultural sensitivity

The research study has revealed a series of complex and sometimes contradictory requirements for international team coaches working with cultural difference in teams. However, rather than a pull towards increasingly sophisticated responses, addressing this coaching challenge has had the opposite effect: a reversion to the fundamental principles of Western coaching. These principles have provided lenses that allow us to consider what else we need to do to coach with cultural sensitivity. Table 8 gives examples of how cultural sensitivity may be developed from the starting point of three International Coaching Federation Core Competencies (ICF, 2019).

We move on to introduce two allied concepts that may be relevant to ITC and cultural sensitivity; these are Cultural Intelligence (CQ) and Cultural Competence (CC). These have emerged as potential areas for future study.

As discussed in Section 3.4, more recent approaches to cultural difference have concentrated on the shared competencies needed for any one person to understand more about cultural difference. In 2003, Earley and Ang (2003: 58) introduced the concept of CQ, defined as 'a person's capability to adapt effectively to new cultural contexts'. CQ looks at four areas that are aligned to the building of cultural sensitivity as shown in Table 9.

The potential value of CQ for coaches working with cultural sensitivity is, that since 2015, there has been a significant increase in empirical studies of CQ (Fang et al., 2018). Studies have claimed that higher CQ results in higher performance levels in teams (Khani et al., 2011), international assignment outcomes (Ott & Michailova, 2018) and overall task performance (Presbitero & Toledano, 2017).

CC studies may also provide team coaches with insights as they develop cultural sensitivity. CC, developed in studies of ways in which medical practitioners can relate better to patients, has been defined as the ability to meet social, cultural and linguistic needs (Betancourt et al., 2002). Components of

**Table 8: Using ICF Competencies to develop Cultural Sensitivity**

ICF Core Competency	Insights for developing cultural sensitivity
3: Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client	<p>Develop greater awareness of, and comfort with own cultural biases.</p> <p>Share uncertainty and vulnerability.</p> <p>Acknowledge the learning that each team-member is providing to you.</p>
5: Active Listening	<p>Mirror language proficiency of team-members in the pace that you speak.</p> <p>Consider higher risk of language ambiguity – ensure team shares understanding.</p> <p>Focus on how comfortable/uncomfortable team-members are in discussing different matters e.g. emotions in the workplace, culturally different team members.</p>
6: Powerful Questioning	<p>Focus on clearly understood questions.</p> <p>What is a culturally powerful question?</p> <p>Sensitivity around culturally taboo matters.</p> <p>Sensitivity to potential loss of face.</p>

**Table 9: Components of Cultural Intelligence (CQ)**

<b>Metacognitive CQ</b>	Acquisition and understanding of cultural knowledge.
<b>Cognitive CQ</b>	General knowledge about culture.
<b>Motivational CQ</b>	Attitude towards learning about cross-cultural situations.
<b>Behavioural CQ</b>	Capability to exhibit appropriate verbal and non-verbal behavior when interacting with people from a different culture.

CC include ‘Belief/Attitude’, ‘Knowledge’, and ‘Skill’ (Sue, 2001, p.799), and awareness of (group) ‘Dynamics of Difference’, when cultures interact (Cross et al., 1989, p.20).

More recent CC studies also place greater emphasis on shared human behaviours rather than individual cultural differences (Keith, 2019). CC offers team coaches

insights into relevant areas such as comfort with negative emotions towards racial/ethnic groups, knowledge of how discriminatory practices operate at a community level, and engaging in verbal/nonverbal helping styles (Sue, 2001); historic distrust (Cross et al., 1989); and attending to shared behaviours (Keith, 2019).

## 7. Conclusion and limitations

This article aimed to cover three objectives with the first being to share the research findings on international team members' perspectives of TC. The sample participants' contributions uncovered valuable perspectives relevant to the broader implementation of TC models across cultures. Participants explained why cultural sensitivity is, for them, a vital consideration in effective international teamwork. Currently, culturally different team members see coaching and TC as serving various purposes. Cultural differences, along with knowledge and experience, emerged as an important factor in influencing these differences. Participants provided a comprehensive checklist of considerations for team coaches planning work with culturally different team members and voiced resistance to deployment of unadapted Western models of coaching in international contexts, suggesting that cultural sensitivity is needed to build trust in teams.

The effectiveness of the study was inhibited by limitations which future research could address. At the design stage, the researchers overestimated participants' awareness of TC, which meant that definitions of TC had to be explained to the participants more often than appropriate for an exploratory study. The use of a 'country coordinator' for the sample, allowed the researchers to reduce their own subjective influence in selection, but may not have eliminated subjective bias in selection. Additionally, the research was undertaken in only one organisation which may limit its generalisability.

The second objective, to demonstrate the value of cultural sensitivity, was covered in the literature review and in discussion of the research findings. Cultural sensitivity was seen to be of benefit in building team-member trust, working with a broader range of experience and deepening team capabilities. The third objective, offering suggestions for how coaches can develop their cultural sensitivity, was met in the discussions on working with coaching fundamentals such as the ICF Core Competencies, and suggested CQ and Cultural Competence as potential areas of further research.

International Team Coaching has potential for bringing more creative and wide-ranging solutions to increasingly complex business problems. If it is to succeed, increasing awareness of how to work with cultural sensitivity appears crucial.

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## Appendix 1

### The Lewis Model: Cultural Types

The Lewis Model informed the selection of culturally different countries. The model distinguishes the six chosen countries as follows:

**United States:** Linear Active, Multi-Active

**Hong Kong:** Reactive, Linear-Active

**Czechia:** Linear-Active, Multi-Active

**Singapore:** Reactive, Linear-Active

**Kazakhstan:** Multi-Active, Linear-Active

**South Africa:** Multi-Active, Reactive

**Note:** Kazakhstan cultural characteristics are those for Russia. Lewis discusses the strength of Russian cultural influence on Kazakh culture. Currently a quarter of the population of Kazakhstan is Ethnic Russian (Central Intelligence Agency, 2019).

### Distinguishing features of linear-active, multi-active and reactive cultures

Linear-Active	Multi-Active	Reactive
<i>United States and Czechia</i>	<i>South Africa and Kazakhstan</i>	<i>Hong Kong and Singapore</i>
Talks half of the time	Talks most of the time	Listens most of the time
Does one thing at a time	Does several things at once	Reacts to Senior Leader's action
Plans ahead step by step	Plans grand outline only	Looks at general principles
Polite but direct	Emotional	Polite, indirect
Confronts with logic	Confronts emotionally	Never confronts
Job orientated	People orientated	Very people orientated
Sticks to facts	Feelings before facts	Statements are promises
Result-orientated	Relationship-orientated	Harmony-orientated
Sticks to agenda	Roams back and forth	Often asks for 'repeats'.
Written word important	Spoken word important	Face-to-face contact important
Restrained body language	Unrestrained body language	Subtle body language

Source: Lewis (2018).

## Appendix 2

### Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

The six countries in the research mapped across Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions.

	USA	Singapore	Hong Kong	Czechia	South Africa	Kazakhstan	Range
PD	40	74	68	57	49	93	40–93
Indiv	91	20	25	58	65	39	20–91
M/F	62	48	57	57	63	36	36–63
UA	46	8	29	74	49	95	8–95
LTO	26	72	61	70	34	81	26–81
Indul	68	46	17	29	63	20	17–68
Range	26–91	8–74	17–68	29–74	34–65	20–95	

Notes: South African scores are based on 'the white population' and Kazakh results are based on Russian data.

### Dimension Definitions

An explanation of the six Hofstede dimensions.

#### Power Distance (PD)

'The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally'.

Singapore has a high Power Distance score indicating that people expect to be told what to do and follow rules. The United States has a low Power Distance score indicating principles of equality and flatter organisational structures.

#### Individualism (Indiv)

'The degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members'.

The United States has a high Individualism score indicating an expectation that people will only look after themselves and their immediate families. Hong Kong has a low Individualism score indicating that people act in the interests of the group.

#### Masculinity/Femininity (M/F)

'The fundamental issue here is what motivates people, wanting to be the best (Masculine) or liking what you do (Feminine)'.

South Africa has a high Masculinity score indicating the importance of competing and winning. Singapore has a high Femininity score (low Masculinity) indicating attention to others and the quality of life.

#### Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)

'The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these'.

Kazakhstan has a high Uncertainty Avoidance score indicating a need to build strong relationships before trusting others. Hong Kong has a low Uncertainty Avoidance score indicating comfort with ambiguity.

### **Long-term Orientation (LTO)**

‘How every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future’.

Czechia has a high Long-term Orientation score indicating a pragmatic approach to the future. The United States has a low Long-term Orientation score indicating strong ties to tradition (e.g. Religion and the Constitution).

### **Indulgence (Indul)**

‘The extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses.’

South Africa has a high Indulgence score indicating a willingness to realise impulses and optimism. Czechia has a low Indulgence score indicating restraint and a tendency to pessimism.

**Source:** Hofstede, 2019.