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# Trust Triggers and Barriers in Intercultural Teams

**Abstract:**

Intercultural teams are more and more popular nowadays – they constitute a serious challenge in terms of effective cooperation and trust building, however. The article presents the potential problems that can affect intercultural cooperation and stresses the power of trust in cultural diversity conditions. The ten-factor model of intercultural team trust is presented. The main aim was to answer the questions: what are the differences in trust factor importance in homogenous and diverse teams and what are the most dangerous trust barriers according to Y generation business students? A survey conducted on 200 respondents allowed for concluding that the deep trust (compatibility, goodwill, predictability, well-being, inclusion and accessibility) is less important than the initial trust (open sharing of information, integrity and reciprocity), with the exception of competence assessment, as well as that all the trust factors are equally important for homogenous and culturally diverse teams, even if there are some differences in their hierarchy depending on the teams' cultural composition. Language differences and stereotypes were pointed as the most important trust barriers. The influence of intercultural training on the elimination of trust barriers was also proved.

**Key words:****teamwork, team trust, cultural diversity, team diversity management**

## Introduction

Trust is a multilevel phenomenon related to the parties' willingness to cooperate, their belief that a relationship is beneficial for them, as well as the level of uncertainty and potential risk (Child, 2001, p. 276). It is defined as positive expectation, attitude, belief or confidence about the other party's behaviour even if the risk of being hurt exists (Piniani & Palvia, 2013; Castaldo et al., 2010, p. 658]. Trust is the will to rely or depend on other people — their intentions, motives and behaviours (Chang et al., 2011; Smyth et al., 2010, p. 119). Trust is also strictly connected to interdependence, which is a basic feature of teamwork (DeOrtentiis et al., 2013).

Trust is crucial for team cooperation because it stimulates interactions, influences the information flow and correlates with team effectiveness and satisfaction (Morita et al., 2013, p. 41). Team trust increases commitment and morale, improves communication and participation in decision making processes, facilitates innovativeness and changes tolerance (Oxfam GB, 2007, p. 6).

Talking about trust in the context of intercultural teams is reasonable because of the development of global corporate and virtual teams that work over geographical borders. The second reason is that cultural diversity generates many possible problems in trust area that can be caused by different understanding of trust, different national trust levels or different determinants and consequences of trust and mistrust (Ferrin & Gillepsie, 2000, pp. 45–47).

Even though cultural diversity is said to be a great source of capital for organizations and teams, it causes a lot of potential problems with collaboration, e.g. conflicts, isolation, discrimination or stress (Mironski, 2010). Cul-



tural dissonance, i.e. the awareness of differences in perception, thinking and behaviours in intercultural relationships, results in decreasing the sense of confidence that we can predict the behaviours of others (Sikorski, 2002, pp. 36–37). It is related to cultural distance, which is more essential when the involved cultures differ significantly (Seymen, 2006, p. 298). The misunderstanding of other people's intentions, motivations and behaviours decreases the initial trust level in intercultural teams (Chang at al., 2011). Cultural dissonance can be connected to the differences in cultural dimensions like time orientation, working style (assertiveness, collectivism, performance orientation, human orientation) or team management (power distance, performance orientation) (House at al., 2002, pp. 5–6; Khan at al. 2010, p. 292). Cultural dissimilarities can be a source of negative factors that inhibit trust building, like erratic behaviour, treachery, goals divergence, disloyalty, poor communication, malevolence or insincerity (Ajmal at al., 2012, pp. 19– 20) or negative stereotypes and isolation (Kuc & Żemigała, 2010, p. 178).

One of the most important elements that influence the cultural distance perception is language. In multilingual teams it is a challenge which can impact the interpersonal relations, knowledge sharing and even peers' competences assessment (Henderson, Louhiala-Salminen, 2011, p. 16) negatively. Even if the team language is English, the common ground is also missed, which can destroy trust between international team members.

On the other hand, lack of trust makes collaboration and good performance in an intercultural team impossible. Child (2001, p. 279) emphasises the role of trust in international collaboration as more powerful than the contract signed between parties because it stimulates good relationships and building sufficient confidence in the partner. Trust generates many benefits for cooperating international partners: it can reduce the cultural distance, it reduces the de-motivation processes, gives the power to cope with changes and conflicts and stimulates open knowledge sharing.

The article presents the ten-factor model of team trust and tests if it actually works in a group of Y generation business students. The power of



mentioned trust barriers is also discussed in view of the correlation with the experience in intercultural teamwork.

## Intercultural trust dimensions

A trust definition that emphasises the basic trust dimensions was proposed by Mühl (2014, p. 54): "Trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is (a) competent, (b) open, (c) concerned, (d) reliable, based upon positive (e) expectations of the outcome based on outside circumstances and (f) past outcomes, (g) intentions, (h) behaviour, (i) integrity (fairness), (j) loyalty, (k) familiarity and/ or (l) honesty of another". According to the author's opinion, not all the dimensions are equally important and their value and combination depends on the parties' situation. A trust dimension model dedicated to intercultural teams is proposed by WorldWord LTD (2008) and it consists of ten dimensions trust, can be based on:

- competence – confidence that the others are competent and do their job properly,
- compatibility – belief that other team members share the same values, attitudes and interests and are committed to achieving common objectives, even if they are different from us,
- goodwill – feeling that the others are concerned about us as a persons, our needs, problems and emotions,
- integrity – confidence that the other parties fulfil their commitments and are consistent in keeping their word,
- predictability – belief that we can rely on another person because we know they are consistent in their behaviours because of some principles or norms,
- well-being – feeling there are no reasons to fear other team participants, sense of security,



- inclusion – based on equal treatment of all team members, feeling we are important for others to complete our team goals,
- openness with information – conviction that all the information is shared in an open and proactive way,
- accessibility – feeling the other participants are open to building personal relations with each other and tend to share personal information,
- reciprocity – confidence that the other team members trust us.

These ten factors can be divided into two groups: dimensions that influence the initial trust — competence, openness with information, integrity and reciprocity, and factors important for deeper trust built during cooperation process, that is compatibility, goodwill, predictability, well-being, inclusion and accessibility [Oxfam GB, 2007, pp. 10–12]. The swift dimensions are based on the first impressions and initial knowledge we have about other participants. The deeper trust factors are developed as the result of gathering good teamwork experiences. This model is based on the research conducted in different cultures and was used to measure intercultural team trust and the trust gaps. It was also used by the author to prepare the research methodology.

## Methodology

The main aim of the presented research was answering the questions: Are the trust dimensions mentioned in the ITTI model important for trust building according to business students?; What are the main trust triggers in intercultural teams in their opinion? Are there any differences in their importance in homogenous and intercultural teams?; What are the main trust barriers in intercultural teams and do the opinions depend on intercultural cooperation experience?

The research participants were the bachelor and master level business students (200 individuals), mostly Poles having experiences in Erasmus



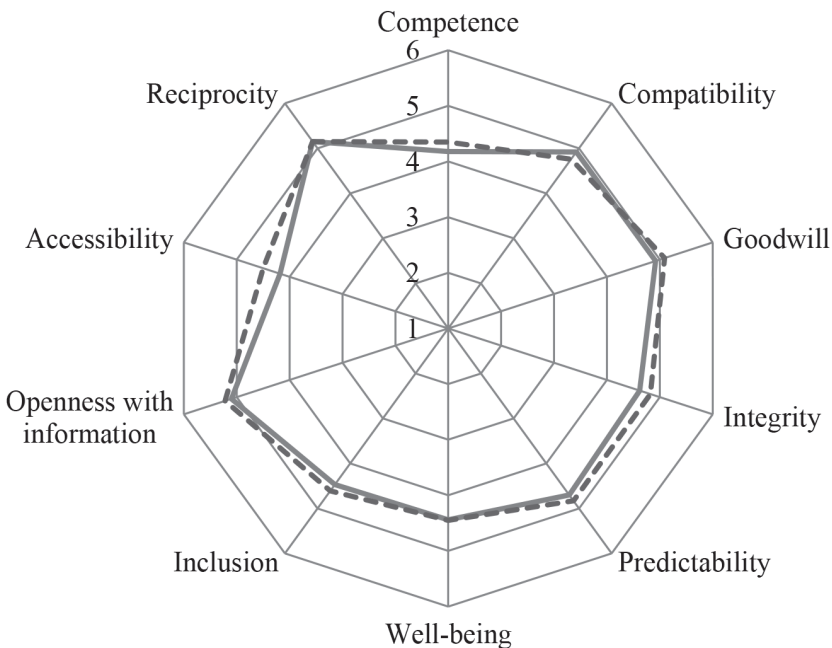
programme and studying abroad (70%) and foreign students attending English language courses in Poland (15%). Each of them had the possibility to study and cooperate in an intercultural environment, so their opinions are not likely to be based on general stereotypes but rather on their own observations and attitudes towards other cultures. All the respondents were asked if they have any experiences in cooperation in intercultural teamwork. 69% of students declared they had such a possibility, whereas 31% have not had any opportunities to participate in intercultural teamwork. Most of students have participated in an academic course dedicated to intercultural differences (72%). Women constituted 69% of the research group and men formed 31% of it.

The study was conducted in two parts: the first was dedicated to the first two questions and based on the questionnaire that consisted of ten expressions related to ten trust dimensions mentioned above. The participants were expected to evaluate each dimension's importance for the cooperation in culturally homogenous and intercultural teams on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 meant "not important at all" and 6 meant "crucial". The second part of the questionnaire was dedicated to trust barriers. There were six main trust destroyers mentioned: language differences, communication style differences, work style differences, management style differences, time orientation differences and stereotypes. The respondents were supposed to assess if they actually constitute important negative factors. The evaluation was made on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant "definitely not" and 5 meant "definitely yes". At the end of the questionnaire an additional question concerning the effects of participation in intercultural student groups was asked. The students were asked if in their perception this possibility has changed their attitudes towards intercultural team cooperation.

## Results

All the trust dimensions were assessed as important in conditions of cultural homogeneity and diversity — the average score for all the ten results exceeded 4.15. There were no statistically significant differences in assessments for these two conditions (t-test,  $p < 0.05$ ), even though almost all the dimensions are higher assessed in context of intercultural cooperation. The only one exception is compatibility, which can be seen in Figure 1. This result is a bit surprising because the feeling of sharing goals and mutual commitment should be much more important in culturally diverse teams, where the differences are obvious and significant.

**Figure 1. Trust dimensions assessment in conditions of cultural homogeneity (continuous line) and diversity (dotted line)**



Source: own work.



The largest gaps concern the accessibility (4.18 in homogenous teams, 4.50 in diverse ones) and integrity (4.62 / 4.82) dimensions, but they are still statistically insignificant ones. Building personal relationships with individuals from other cultures can be much more challenging but is the only one chance to understand their values and points of view, as well as getting to know each other in general, so the higher rank of this factor is reasonable. The confidence that the other party will fulfil its commitments and be consistent in keeping its word can also be much more important in intercultural environment where the initial trust is usually lower and the assessment of relation risk is higher.

The experiences in intercultural teamwork slightly change the results: in comparison with the other group of respondents, the experienced students assessed openness with information as more important, and the result was statistically significant (average results: 5.30:5.16,  $t = -0.67$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). It can be a signal of some communication problems that appeared in intercultural cooperation the students have practiced and which are typical especially at the initial level of intercultural teamwork.

The gender differences influence two dimensions: reciprocity (R) and goodwill (G) — they were more important for trust in intercultural teams according to women's opinions (R: average result for women: 5.28, for men: 4.56,  $t = 2.51$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , G: average result for women: 5.21, for men: 4.65,  $t = 2.46$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Probably the feeling of cohesion, kindness and mutual support can be more important for women in the conditions of intercultural differences where they can be easily lost because of cultural dissonance.

The differences can also be noticed in the hierarchy of the ten dimensions. The most important dimension according to participants' opinion is reciprocity in homogenous teams (5.15) and openness with information in culturally diverse teams (5.22). The ranks of all the trust dimensions are presented in Table 1.



**Table 1. Trust dimensions hierarchy in conditions of cultural homogeneity and diversity**

Dimension	Position in the importance hierarchy (average result)	
	Homogenous team	Intercultural team
Reciprocity	1 (5.15)	2 (5.15)
Openness with information	2 (4.92)	1 (5.22)
Goodwill	3 (4.92)	3 (5.09)
Compatibility	3 (4.92)	6 (4.79)
Predictability	4 (4.70)	4 (4.8)
Integrity	5 (4.62)	5 (4.82)
Inclusion	6 (4.47)	7 (4.61)
Well-being	7 (4.44)	9 (4.45)
Competence	8 (4.18)	10 (4.35)
Accessibility	9 (4.18)	8 (4.5)

**Source: own work.**

The most visible difference concerns the position of the compatibility dimension, which is three ranks higher in intercultural teams hierarchy. The clear differences in values and attitudes based on cultural dissonance are probably obvious for individuals with intercultural cooperation experiences – they can be perceived as obvious and much less important in trust level assessment than the other dimensions. In spite of such result, compatibility is an important factor in intercultural teams – the average result here is 4.79.

What is most surprising in the hierarchy structure is the fact that the competence factor is the last or the second-to-last one. It seems to be



even more unexpected in the context of the fact that the initial trust dimensions are generally assessed as more important than the deep ones in one-culture and intercultural teams (Table 2).

**Table 2. Initial and deep trust dimensions importance in conditions of cultural homogeneity and diversity (average results)**

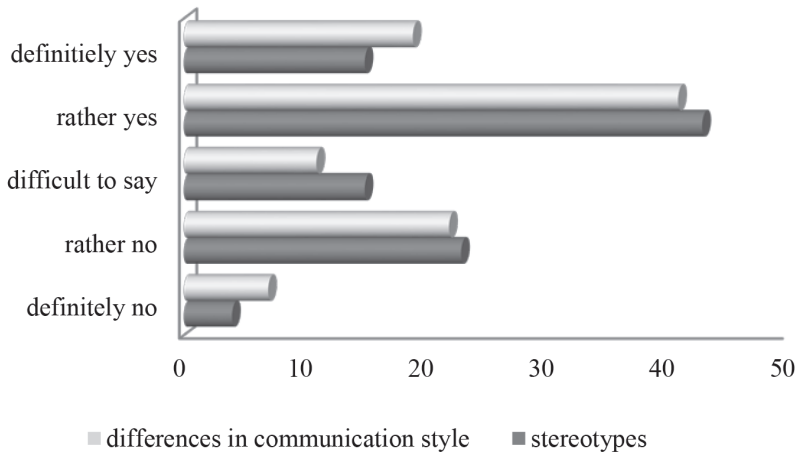
	Homogenous team	Intercultural team
Initial trust	4.76	4.88
Deep trust	4.61	4.71

**Source: own work.**

Competence is also one of the swift trust factors and the result can reflect the fact that at the beginning of cooperation the soft dimensions, connected strictly with interpersonal relationships (integrity, openness with information and reciprocity), are more important for the research group. One reason for this can be the existence of cultural cooperation barriers at the initial phase of teamwork. The second part of the research was focused on the identification and assessment of the strongest barriers.

All the barriers were assessed as not very powerful in intercultural cooperation – all the results are under 4. The strongest ones, stereotypes and differences in communication styles, have the average results of about 3.4, but despite that there are 40% respondents who evaluated them as really important. The results distribution for this factor is presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Answers to the question: Are stereotypes and differences in communication style the reason of trust decrease in intercultural teams? (in %)**



**Source: own work.**

More than 55% of students believe that stereotypes and communication differences are the reasons of trust decrease in intercultural cooperation. The barrier assessed as the least powerful is foreign language usage (2.93). It seems to be reasonable in the group of individuals able to speak English fluently. Table 3 presents the scores for all the trust barriers and shows the differences between opinions of groups of individuals experienced in intercultural cooperation and the ones not having such background. The bold results are different for the experienced and inexperienced group on a statistically significant level ( $p < 0.05$ ). The individuals who had possibility to cooperate in a culturally diverse team are less afraid of destructive impact of three trust barriers: foreign language usage ( $t = 4.44$ ), differences in communication style ( $t = 2.04$ ) and stereotypes ( $t = 2.61$ ). In the case of other factors, even though they are evaluated as the less important barriers by the experienced group, the differences are not statistically significant. The foreign language barrier was the only one that significantly differed among

the respondent groups with and without cultural competence training. The ones who have not had classes on cultural diversity were much more afraid that language differences can be harmful for team trust building (average results: 3.71:2.76;  $t = -3.67$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 3. Trust barriers: general (average) results and the evaluations of the experienced and inexperienced groups**

Barriers	Power evaluation		
	general	Experienced group	Non-experienced group
Foreign language usage	2.93	2.65	3.58
Communication style differences	3.41	3.31	3.66
Work style differences	3.34	3.32	3.40
Management style differences	3.22	3.20	3.26
Time orientation differences	3.32	3.33	3.32
Stereotypes	3.43	3.27	3.76

**Source: own work.**

The open question concerning the effects of the participation in intercultural relationships courses also shows the positive results of such intercultural training. The students' answers allowed for concluding that the main effect of such experience is the awareness of and knowledge about cultural differences: their influence on cooperation and task resolution. Some of them stressed the gap between stereotypes and the real characteristics of foreigners. Stereotypes were also pointed as the most influential barri-

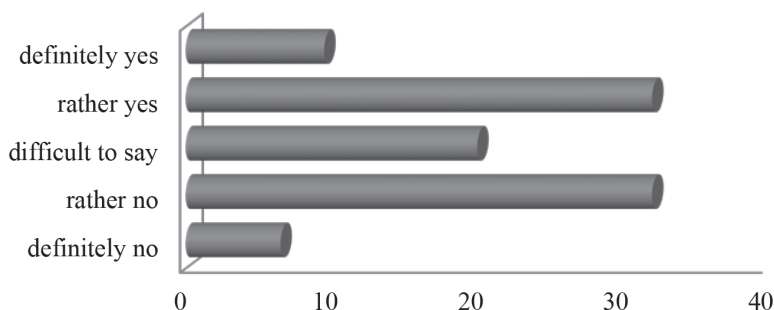
er in international teams. Respondents have noticed that the intercultural teams are more demanding because of these differences and have learnt that respect and tolerance are the basic rules in intercultural cooperation. Some students appreciate the importance of English language fluency that allows for initiating and building a deeper relationship. These are some of respondents' statements:

- "I am less afraid of working in international teams. I do not mind using English, I am aware of cultural differences. I have learnt that intercultural teams are more efficient and it is very important to get familiar with other cultures when we cooperate in intercultural teams".
- "I have learnt that in other cultures tasks are performed in different ways and sometimes require more or less time. But I definitely learnt more tolerance for other cultures in terms of business relations, team working and fulfilling tasks".
- "The best thing I have learnt was that foreigners can be really different and how they are different, and how they are the same".
- "I have learnt that different cultures work in different ways, but we are all human and the team work is more likely to be influenced by personal traits than by the nationality itself. However, there are some nationalities which work in a very different style, which makes cooperation difficult. Still, personal traits are more influential than people's origin".

Do the mentioned awareness and openness to other cultures increase the level of trust in intercultural teams? The final question the respondents were expected to answer focused on trust and read: Is it much more difficult to trust each other in a intercultural team? The results are presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. Answers to the question: Is it much more difficult to trust each other in an intercultural team? (in %)**



**Source: own work.**

The participants' answers are distributed almost equally between into positive and negative ones. This question is a really important one, because correlation analysis confirmed the correlation between answers to it and the students' declaration of interest in trust in international collaboration ( $r = -0.25$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), as well as willingness to manage an intercultural team ( $r = 0.15$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ).

As far as the interpretation is concerned, it may be said that the students' convictions about trust and intercultural plans are linked to each other.

## Conclusions

All ten trust factors appeared to be important in homogeneous and culturally diverse teams. The results achieved for both kinds of teams are almost equal. It can be an effect of international experiences of tested students – intercultural diversity conditions are nothing unique for them and even if they are aware of the potential barriers, they treat cultural differences as equivalent to other ones (e.g. personality or competence diversity). In case of culturally diverse team building, the initial trust seems to be more



important than the deep trust based on common team members experiences. Reciprocity and openness with information are crucial trust triggers for intercultural cooperation, which emphasizes the importance of positive attitudes towards peers regardless of their country of origin. Eliminating cultural stereotypes and negative prejudice, which are the main intercultural team cooperation barriers, seems to be the best solution for intercultural team trust stimulation and development.

The experiences in intercultural cooperation can be helpful in reducing stereotypical attitudes towards foreign team members, decreasing the fear of foreign language usage and making the differences regarding communication and cooperation style less discouraging.

Recommendations for the culturally diverse team leaders who want to build team trust include the following ones:

- before the intercultural team members start cooperation, they should receive information about the other involved cultures so that the power of stereotypes and fears can be reduced;
- one of the important elements of intercultural team formation should be the time dedicated to letting the members get to know each other in order to weaken the stereotypes and to strengthen the reciprocity and well-being effect;
- the team leader should take care of information flow and propose the team rules that stimulate the openness with information and compatibility perception;
- even if the team members are experienced in intercultural teamwork, team trust supporting can be crucial for the team effectiveness and needs.

The further research recommendation is to analyse the result concerning compatibility in intercultural teams, because the argument that the common goals and team rules are the trust triggers seems to be reasonable but was not fully confirmed (the lower rank in the intercultural team). Another research task can be conducting the analysis of trust dynamics in intercultural teams to find out the ten trust dimensions changes during the



cooperation process to formulate recommendations for trust building in each of the team work phase.



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