

## SPOTLIGHT

ARTWORK Shannon Rankin, *Basin* (detail)

Uncharted series, 2009, cut map on paper, full size 20" x 20"







**Tsedal Neeley** (@tsedal)  
is an associate professor at  
Harvard Business School  
and the founder of the  
consulting firm Global  
Matters.

# Global Teams That Work

***A framework for bridging social distance***  
by Tsedal Neeley



**T** **TO SUCCEED IN** the global economy today, more and more companies are relying on a geographically dispersed workforce. They build teams that offer the best functional expertise from around the world, combined with deep, local knowledge of the most promising markets. They draw on the benefits of international diversity, bringing together people from many cultures with varied work experiences and different perspectives on strategic and organizational challenges. All this helps multinational companies compete in the current business environment.

But managers who actually lead global teams are up against stiff challenges. Creating successful work groups is hard enough when everyone is local and people share the same office space. But when team members come from different countries and functional backgrounds and are working in different locations, communication can rapidly deteriorate, misunderstanding can ensue, and cooperation can degenerate into distrust.

Preventing this vicious dynamic from taking place has been a focus of my research, teaching, and consulting for more than 15 years. I have conducted dozens of studies and heard from countless executives and managers about misunderstandings within the global teams they have joined or led, sometimes with costly consequences. But I have also encountered teams that have produced remarkable

innovations, creating millions of dollars in value for their customers and shareholders.

One basic difference between global teams that work and those that don't lies in the level of social distance—the degree of emotional connection among team members. When people on a team all work in the same place, the level of social distance is usually low. Even if they come from different backgrounds, people can interact formally and informally, align, and build trust. They arrive at a common understanding of what certain behaviors mean, and they feel close and congenial, which fosters good teamwork. Coworkers who are geographically separated, however, can't easily connect and align, so they experience high levels of social distance and struggle to develop effective interactions. Mitigating social distance therefore becomes the primary management challenge for the global team leader.

To help in this task, I have developed and tested a framework for identifying and successfully managing social distance. It is called the SPLIT framework, reflecting its five components: structure, process, language, identity, and technology—each of which can be a source of social distance. In the following pages I explain how each can lead to team dysfunction and describe how smart leaders can fix problems that occur—or prevent them from happening in the first place.

## Views from a Dispersed Team

The marketing team of a multinational pharmaceutical company had 17 members in different locations. Each group, depending on size and proximity to the leader in Boston, saw the power structure differently.

### **MOSCOW 1 PERSON**

"I am all on my own here and at the mercy of the Boston group. I need to make sure that the boss has my back."

### **SINGAPORE/TOKYO 3 PEOPLE**

"Our opinions are often ignored. It's so difficult to find a good time to exchange ideas, and even if we do manage to connect, we can't get a word in edgewise."

### **LONDON 5 PEOPLE**

"We represent the most challenging regions in terms of diversity and institutional hurdles. The Boston team really doesn't understand our markets."

### **BOSTON 8 PEOPLE**

"We do the important work and have easy access to the boss."



## Idea in Brief

### THE PROBLEM

When teams consist of people from different cultures working apart from one another in different locations, social distance—or a lack of emotional connection—can cause miscommunication, misunderstanding, and distrust.

### THE SOLUTION

The leaders of global teams can improve the workings of their groups by using the author's SPLIT framework to identify and address five sources of social distance: structure, process, language, identity, and technology.

## Structure and the Perception of Power

In the context of global teams, the structural factors determining social distance are the location and number of sites where team members are based and the number of employees who work at each site.

The fundamental issue here is the perception of power. If most team members are located in Germany, for instance, with two or three in the United States and in South Africa, there may be a sense that the German members have more power. This imbalance sets up a negative dynamic. People in the larger (majority) group may feel resentment toward the minority group, believing that the latter will try to get away with contributing less than its fair share. Meanwhile, those in the minority group may believe that the majority is usurping what little power and voice they have.

The situation is exacerbated when the leader is at the site with the most people or the one closest to company headquarters: Team members at that site tend to ignore the needs and contributions of their colleagues at other locations. This dynamic can occur even when everyone is in the same country: The five people working in, say, Beijing may have a strong allegiance to one another and a habit of shutting out their two colleagues in Shanghai.

When geographically dispersed team members perceive a power imbalance, they often come to feel that there are in-groups and out-groups. Consider the case of a global marketing team for a U.S.-based multinational pharmaceutical company. The leader and the core strategy group for the Americas worked in the company's Boston-area headquarters. A smaller group in London and a single individual in Moscow focused on the markets in Europe. Three other team members, who split their time between Singapore and Tokyo, were responsible for strategy in Asia. The way that each group perceived

its situation is illustrated in the exhibit "Views from a Dispersed Team."

To correct perceived power imbalances between different groups, a leader needs to get three key messages across:

**Who we are.** The team is a single entity, even though individual members may be very different from one another. The leader should encourage sensitivity to differences but look for ways to bridge them and build unity. Tariq, a 33-year-old rising star in a global firm, was assigned to lead a 68-person division whose members hailed from 27 countries, spoke 18 languages, and ranged in age from 22 to 61. During the two years before he took charge, the group's performance had been in a precipitous decline and employee satisfaction had plunged. Tariq saw that the team had fractured into subgroups according to location and language. To bring people back together, he introduced a team motto ("We are different yet one"), created opportunities for employees to talk about their cultures, and instituted a zero-tolerance policy for displays of cultural insensitivity.

**What we do.** It's important to remind team members that they share a common purpose and to direct their energy toward business-unit or corporate goals. The leader should periodically highlight how everyone's work fits into the company's overall strategy and advances its position in the market. For instance, during a weekly conference call, a global team leader might review the group's performance relative to company objectives. She might also discuss the level of collective focus and sharpness the team needs in order to fend off competitors.

**I am there for you.** Team members located far from the leader require frequent contact with him or her. A brief phone call or e-mail can make all the difference in conveying that their contributions matter. For instance, one manager in Dallas, Texas, inherited

a large group in India as part of an acquisition. He made it a point to involve those employees in important decisions, contact them frequently to discuss ongoing projects, and thank them for good work. He even called team members personally to give them their birthdays off. His team appreciated his attention and became more cohesive as a result.

### Process and the Importance of Empathy

It almost goes without saying that empathy helps reduce social distance. If colleagues can talk informally around a watercooler—whether about work or about personal matters—they are more likely to develop an empathy that helps them interact productively in more-formal contexts. Because geographically dispersed team members lack regular face time, they are less likely to have a sense of mutual understanding. To foster this, global team leaders need to make sure they build the following “deliberate moments” into the process for meeting virtually:

**Feedback on routine interactions.** Members of global teams may unwittingly send the wrong signals with their everyday behavior. Julie, a French chemical engineer, and her teammates in Marseille checked and responded to e-mails only first thing in the morning, to ensure an uninterrupted workday. They had no idea that this practice was routinely adding an overnight delay to correspondence with their American colleagues and contributing to mistrust. It was not until Julie visited the team’s offices in California that the French group realized there was a problem. Of course, face-to-face visits are not the only way to acquire such learning. Remote team members can also use the phone, e-mail, or even videoconferencing to check in with one another and ask how the collaboration is going. The point is that leaders and members of global teams must actively elicit this kind of “reflected knowledge,” or awareness of how others see them.

**Unstructured time.** Think back to your last face-to-face meeting. During the first few minutes before the official discussion began, what was the atmosphere like? Were people comparing notes on the weather, their kids, that new restaurant in town? Unstructured communication like this is positive, because it allows for the organic unfolding of processes that must occur in all business dealings—sharing knowledge, coordinating and monitoring interactions, and building relationships. Even when

people are spread all over the world, small talk is still a powerful way to promote trust. So when planning your team’s call-in meetings, factor in five minutes for light conversation before business gets under way. Especially during the first meetings, take the lead in initiating informal discussions about work and nonwork matters that allow team members to get to know their distant counterparts. In particular, encourage people to be open about constraints they face outside the project, even if those aren’t directly linked to the matter at hand.

**Time to disagree.** Leaders should encourage disagreement both about the team’s tasks and about the process by which the tasks get done. The challenge, of course, is to take the heat out of the debate. Framing meetings as brainstorming opportunities lowers the risk that people will feel pressed to choose between sides. Instead, they will see an invitation to evaluate agenda items and contribute their ideas. As the leader, model the act of questioning to get to the heart of things. Solicit each team member’s views on each topic you discuss, starting with those who have the least status or experience with the group so that they don’t feel intimidated by others’ comments. This may initially seem like a waste of time, but if you seek opinions up front, you may make better decisions and get buy-in from more people.

A software developer in Istanbul kept silent in a team meeting in order to avoid conflict, even though he questioned his colleagues’ design of a particular feature. He had good reasons to oppose their decision, but his team leader did not brook disagreement, and the developer did not want to damage his own position. However, four weeks into the project, the team ran into the very problems that the developer had seen coming.

### Language and the Fluency Gap

Good communication among coworkers drives effective knowledge sharing, decision making, coordination, and, ultimately, performance results (see also “What’s Your Language Strategy?” by Tsedal Neeley and Robert Steven Kaplan, HBR, September 2014). But in global teams, varying levels of fluency with the chosen common language are inevitable—and likely to heighten social distance. The team members who can communicate best in the organization’s lingua franca (usually English) often exert the most influence, while those who are less fluent often become inhibited and withdraw. Mitigating

## Rules of Engagement for Team Meetings

All team members should be guided by these three rules to ensure that influence on decisions is not dictated by fluency in the company's lingua franca.

<p><b>FLUENT SPEAKERS</b></p> <p><b>DIAL DOWN DOMINANCE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Slow down the pace and use familiar language (e.g., fewer idioms).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Refrain from dominating the conversation.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask: "Do you understand what I am saying?"</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Listen actively.</li> </ul>
<p><b>LESS FLUENT SPEAKERS</b></p> <p><b>DIAL UP ENGAGEMENT</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Resist withdrawal or other avoidance behaviors.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Refrain from reverting to your native language.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ask: "Do you understand what I am saying?"</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> If you don't understand others, ask them to repeat or explain.</li> </ul>
<p><b>TEAM LEADERS</b></p> <p><b>BALANCE FOR INCLUSION</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Monitor participants and strive to balance their speaking and listening.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Actively draw contributions from all team members.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Solicit participation from less fluent speakers in particular.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Be prepared to define and interpret content.</li> </ul>

these effects typically involves insisting that all team members respect three rules for communicating in meetings:

**Dial down dominance.** Strong speakers must agree to slow down their speaking pace and use fewer idioms, slang terms, and esoteric cultural references when addressing the group. They should limit the number of comments they make within a set time frame, depending on the pace of the meeting and the subject matter. They should actively seek confirmation that they've been understood, and they should practice active listening by rephrasing others' statements for clarification or emphasis.

**Dial up engagement.** Less fluent speakers should monitor the frequency of their responses in meetings to ensure that they are contributing. In some cases, it's even worth asking them to set goals for the number of comments they make within a given period. Don't let them use their own language and have a teammate translate, because that can alienate others. As with fluent speakers, team members who are less proficient in the language

must always confirm that they have been understood. Encourage them to routinely ask if others are following them. Similarly, when listening, they should be empowered to say they have not understood something. It can be tough for nonnative speakers to make this leap, yet doing so keeps them from being marginalized.

**Balance participation to ensure inclusion.** Getting commitments to good speaking behavior is the easy part; making the behavior happen will require active management. Global team leaders must keep track of who is and isn't contributing and deliberately solicit participation from less fluent speakers. Sometimes it may also be necessary to get dominant-language speakers to dial down to ensure that the proposals and perspectives of less fluent speakers are heard.

The leader of a global team based in Dubai required all his reports to post the three communication rules in their cubicles. Soon he noted that one heavily accented European team member began contributing to discussions for the first time since joining the group 17 months earlier. The rules had given this person the license, opportunity, and responsibility to speak up. As a leader, you could try the same tactics with your own team, distributing copies of the exhibit "Rules of Engagement for Team Meetings."

### Identity and the Mismatch of Perceptions

Global teams work most smoothly when members "get" where their colleagues are coming from. However, deciphering someone's identity and finding ways to relate is far from simple. People define themselves in terms of a multitude of variables—age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, occupation, political ties, and so forth. And although behavior can be revealing, particular behaviors may signify different things depending on the individual's identity. For example, someone in North America who looks you squarely in the eye may project confidence and honesty, but in other parts of the world, direct eye contact might be perceived as rude or threatening. Misunderstandings such as this are a major source of social distance and distrust, and global team leaders have to raise everyone's awareness of them. This involves mutual learning and teaching.

**Learning from one another.** When adapting to a new cultural environment, a savvy leader will avoid making assumptions about what behaviors

mean. Take a step back, watch, and listen. In America, someone who says, “Yes, I can do this” likely means she is willing and able to do what you asked. In India, however, the same statement may simply signal that she wants to try—not that she’s confident of success. Before drawing conclusions, therefore, ask a lot of questions. In the example just described, you might probe to see if the team member anticipates any challenges or needs additional resources. Asking for this information may yield greater insight into how the person truly feels about accomplishing the task.

## Team members quickly pick up on the leader’s preferences regarding communication technology, so set the example you want others to follow.

The give-and-take of asking questions and providing answers establishes two-way communication between the leader and team members. And if a leader regularly solicits input, acting as a student rather than an expert with hidden knowledge, he empowers others on the team, leading them to participate more willingly and effectively. A non-Mandarin-speaking manager in China relied heavily on his local staff during meetings with clients in order to better understand clients’ perceptions of the interactions and to gauge the appropriateness of his own behavior. His team members began to see themselves as essential to the development of client relationships and felt valued, which motivated them to perform at even higher levels.

In this model, everyone is a teacher and a learner, which enables people to step out of their traditional roles. Team members take on more responsibility for the development of the team as a whole. Leaders learn to see themselves as unfinished and are thus more likely to adjust their style to reflect the team’s needs. They instruct but they also facilitate, helping team members to parse their observations and understand one another’s true identities.

**A case in point.** Consider the experience of Daniel, the leader of a recently formed multinational team spread over four continents. During a conference call, he asked people to discuss a particular strategy for reaching a new market in a challenging location. This was the first time he had raised a topic on which there was a range of opinion.

Daniel observed that Theo, a member of the Israeli team, regularly interrupted Angela, a member of the Buenos Aires team, and their ideas were at odds. Although tempted to jump in and play referee, Daniel held back. To his surprise, neither Theo nor Angela got frustrated. They went back and forth, bolstering their positions by referencing typical business practices and outcomes in their respective countries, but they stayed committed to reaching a group consensus.

At the meeting’s end, Daniel shared his observations with the team, addressing not only the content of the discussion, but also the manner in which it took place. “Theo and Angela,” he said, “when you began to hash out your ideas, I was concerned that both of you might have felt you weren’t being heard or weren’t getting a chance to fully express your thoughts. But now you both seem satisfied that you were able to make your arguments, articulate cultural perspectives, and help us decide on our next steps. Is that true?”

Theo and Angela affirmed Daniel’s observations and provided an additional contextual detail: Six months earlier they had worked together on another project—an experience that allowed them to establish their own style of relating to each other. Their ability to acknowledge and navigate their cultural differences was beneficial to everyone on the team. Not only did it help move their work forward, but it showed that conflict does not have to create social distance. And Daniel gained more information about Theo and Angela, which would help him manage the team more effectively in the future.

### Technology and the Connection Challenge

The modes of communication used by global teams must be carefully considered, because the technologies can both reduce and increase social distance. Videoconferencing, for instance, allows rich communication in which both context and emotion can be perceived. E-mail offers greater ease and efficiency but lacks contextual cues. In making decisions



about which technology to use, a leader must ask the following:

**Should communication be instant?**

Teleconferencing and videoconferencing enable real-time (instant) conversations. E-mail and certain social media formats require users to wait for the other party to respond. Choosing between instant and delayed forms of communication can be especially challenging for global teams. For example, when a team spans multiple time zones, a telephone call may not be convenient for everyone. The Japanese team leader of a U.S.-based multinational put it this way: “I have three or four days per week when I have a conference call with global executives. In most cases, it starts at 9:00 or 10:00 in the night. If we can take the conference call in the daytime, it’s much easier for me. But we are in the Far East, and headquarters is in the United States, so we have to make the best of it.”

Instant technologies are valuable when leaders need to persuade others to adopt their viewpoint. But if they simply want to share information, then delayed methods such as e-mail are simpler, more efficient, and less disruptive to people’s lives. Leaders must also consider the team’s interpersonal dynamics. If the team has a history of conflict, technology choices that limit the opportunities for real-time emotional exchanges may yield the best results.

In general, the evidence suggests that most companies overrely on delayed communication. A recent Forrester survey of nearly 10,000 information workers in 17 countries showed that 94% of employees report using e-mail, but only 33% ever participate in desktop videoconferencing (with apps such as Skype and Viber), and a mere 25% use room-based videoconferencing. These numbers will surely change over time, as the tools evolve and users become more comfortable with them, but leaders need to choose their format carefully: instant or delayed.

**Do I need to reinforce the message?** Savvy leaders will communicate through multiple platforms to ensure that messages are understood and remembered. For example, if a manager electronically assigns one of her team members a task by entering notes into a daily work log, she may then follow up with a text or a face-to-face chat to ensure that the team member saw the request and recognized its urgency.

Redundant communication is also effective for leaders who are concerned about convincing others

that their message is important. Greg, for instance, a project manager in a medical devices organization, found that his team was falling behind on the development of a product. He called an emergency meeting to discuss the issues and explain new corporate protocols for releasing new products, which he felt would bring the project back on track.

During this initial meeting, he listened to people’s concerns and addressed their questions in real time. Although he felt he had communicated his position clearly and obtained the necessary verbal buy-in, he followed up the meeting by sending a carefully drafted e-mail to all the attendees, reiterating the agreed-upon changes and asking for everyone’s electronic sign-off. This redundant communication helped reinforce acceptance of his ideas and increased the likelihood that his colleagues would actually implement the new protocols.

**Am I leading by example?** Team members very quickly pick up on the leader’s personal preferences regarding communication technology. A leader who wants to encourage people to videoconference should communicate this way herself. If she wants employees to pick up the phone and speak to one another, she had better be a frequent user of the phone. And if she wants team members to respond quickly to e-mails, she needs to set the example.

**FLEXIBILITY AND APPRECIATION** for diversity are at the heart of managing a global team. Leaders must expect problems and patterns to change or repeat themselves as teams shift, disband, and regroup. But there is at least one constant: To manage social distance effectively and maximize the talents and engagement of team members, leaders must stay attentive to all five of the SPLIT dimensions. Decisions about *structure* create opportunities for good *process*, which can mitigate difficulties caused by *language* differences and *identity* issues. If leaders act on these fronts, while marshaling *technology* to improve communication among geographically dispersed colleagues, social distance is sure to shrink, not expand. When that happens, teams can become truly representative of the “global village”—not just because of their international makeup, but also because their members feel mutual trust and a sense of kinship. They can then embrace and practice the kind of innovative, respectful, and groundbreaking interactions that drive the best ideas forward. ♥

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