

## The influence of intercultural communication and diversity on the organizational response to crisis and uncertainty

A collaborative online international learning project designed by:

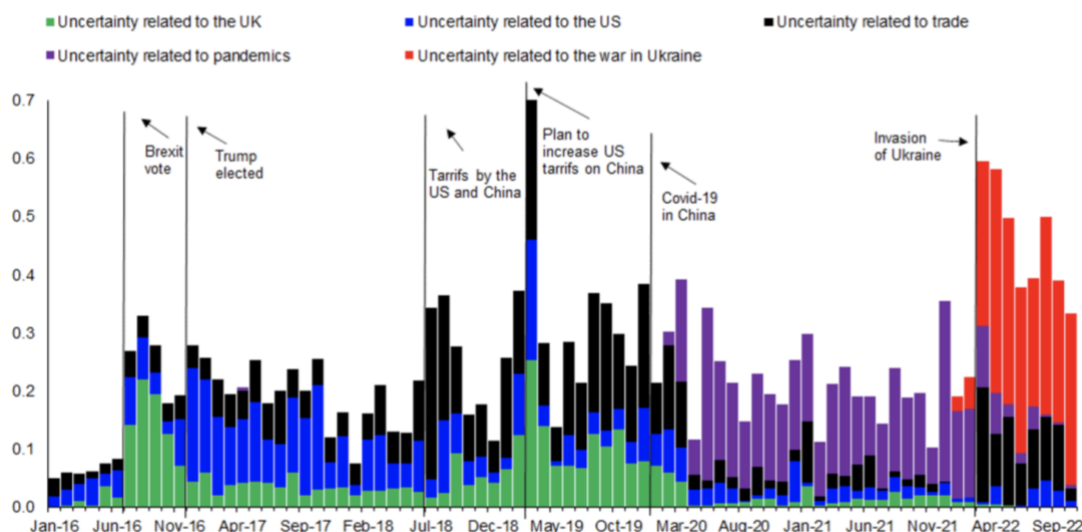
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## 1. The topic at glance

While Sars-Cov-2 has hit the global community in an unprecedented manner, it is only representative for a general movement towards crises of aggravated magnitude and scope (Boin, 2009; Reber et al., 2020), which occur in the context of our increasingly interconnected, globalised society. Issues that are seemingly unrelated evolve into complex crises (Rivera and Stainback, 2019) and transcend geographical, functional and time borders (Boin, 2009). The global financial crisis, political polarization, trade conflicts, the pandemic, the climate crisis as well as armed conflicts have raised concerns over rising economic uncertainty that generates a difficult operating environment for managers and organizations (Figure 1).

Those transboundary crises and the uncertainty they generate not only affect the physiological, social, and financial well-being of publics (Nowak & Greenwell, 2020) but also represent major challenges for the crisis management and crisis communication of economic actors.

*Figure 1: Contribution to overall uncertainty by five major shocks, January 2016 to October 2022*



Source: Ahir, H., Bloom N. and Furceri, D. (2022), "World Uncertainty Index", NBER Working Paper (retrieved at: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w29763>)

Crises are highly influenced by the communicative actions taken to explain, illustrate and resolve them (Liu, B.F. et al. 2016). Crisis communication takes place at different levels, interpersonal as well as mass-mediated levels and intercultural issues and problems may be found in most crises today (Fatima Oliveira, M. de., 2013). This is obvious when it comes to crises or disasters involving whole communities, regions or nations. Indeed, crises are dependent on the cultural context that they develop within. While national culture is the overarching culture that exists within a country, organisational culture can be described as "the way we do things within an organisation". While national culture is based on values, organisational culture is based on practices. This means that from an organizational and managerial perspective there may not be one best way to communicate before, during or after a crisis, but several ways depending on cultural and contextual dimensions. Crisis scholars (Falkheimer and Zhao, 2020) underline the differences between Asian and Western cultures, such as individualism/collectivism, low-context/high-context cultures and self-disclosure, and their influence on crisis communication. Cultural differences play also a relevant role in managing and responding to the uncertainty caused by crises.

As indicated by Hofstede (1991) the uncertainty avoidance has to do with the way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known. The ambiguity brings with it anxiety, and different cultures have learnt to deal with this anxiety in different ways.

While cultural differences need to be acknowledged, culture does not imply that everyone in a given society is programmed in the same way (Hofstede, 1991). Indeed, diversity includes a wide spectrum of facets, such as gender, race, age, religion, socio-economic status, and vulnerability (Seyman, 2006) and those factors are likely to have an influence in the communication process and on how people respond to uncertainty and crisis.

## **2. The aim of the joint project**

The joint project HHN-Colman pursues following objectives:

- Through work and exchange in a multicultural virtual team you should develop awareness of your own culture's influence on their communication
- From the contact with companies, you should gain knowledge of multiple perspectives, processes and best practices for effective intercultural communication in dealing with uncertainty and crisis

## **3. The group task**

The main topics at the base of your group task are:

- Intercultural communication
- Diversity
- Uncertainty and uncertain environment
- External crisis

Each group will **carry one interview with a manager of a pre-selected company**, who is leading an international team in those turbulent times characterised by external crises and uncertainty (your coaches will provide you with the contact details of the company/manager that is assigned to your group). You will need to inform yourself about the company prior to the interview and to familiarize yourself with the concepts highlighted above (readings are provided), which will be discussed in class with your instructor. The interview will be carefully analysed by the group members and results will be illustrated in a final presentation scheduled for April 23.

The companies selected for the project are:

- XM Cyber (Israeli based company owned by a German group)
- Mercedes- Benz AG (Germany)
- Ice Cure Medical (Israel)
- Azami Global – (Israel)
- CheckmarX (Israel)

Students will also need **to carry on an individual self-evaluation** of the project that needs to be handed in to their instructor one week after the projects is completed.

The schedule of the project is presented below.

**Presence on April 3. and April 24 is compulsory.** The meeting will be online and will take place in the afternoon at 2 pm German time – 3pm Israeli time. Students will receive a link of the virtual meeting.

3.4.2024	<b>First joint meeting HHN-Colman</b> Guest lecture by Ms Maike Diehl, on German-Israeli cultural factors on April 3rd Getting to know each other International group formation Tasks and guidance Presentation of companies and discussion of interview outline
10.4.2024	Discussion on research progress in the respective classes Students work with their counterparts (outside class hours). Contact with the company (as planned by each group)
17.4.2024	Discussion on research progress in the respective classes Students work with their counterparts (outside class hours) – Contact with the company assigned (as planned by each group)
24.4.2024	<b>Joint meeting HHN-Colman</b> Final presentation of the groups – students can be creative One slide summary Maybe allocate more time for this session.

#### 4. Instructions

1. The instructors will divide you in mixed teams (5-6 members for team) and will inform you at the beginning of the project about the members of your teams so that you can get in touch with each other.
2. The first task is to get to know each other, i.e. tell a little bit about yourself, ask questions of each other, comment on each team member's introduction.
3. Remember that in order to be effective, you need to invest in a-formal communication and interaction. Try to find common interests and common topics which will make you feel like you belong to the same group of people.
4. Review together the task assigned and consider assigning roles and defining rules. You can produce a very simple "team contract" just stating who is in the team, what roles you have, what the team rules are and how and when you communicate. Even when having work meeting don't forget to use some of the time to talk about yourselves, studies etc. Any team works better when the members know each other personally, as well. Try to have as many video meetings as possible, as – based on the experience – the teams work much better and the results are better, as well, when they talk to each other live. Below you find a table that will help you set up the division of labor between the group members.
5. You will need to plan your own meetings and internal deadlines to make it work. Please, keep in mind that a good schedule means an equal amount of compromises. Each team can also request a

meeting with the instructors in case assistance is needed. Please be also aware that while in Germany the working week is from Monday to Friday, in Israel it is from Sunday to Thursday

6. This task must be completed as a group. This is not without its challenges. Please ensure that you all contribute fairly to the task. If there are any issues with your group member in relation to contributing to work on the task we ask that you contact the person directly. If you have no response from the group member you can then contact your coach via email

*We hope you enjoy the project and take time to get to know each other, and to get to know yourself!*

#### **5. Outline of tasks to divide between the group members.**

- a. Leading the team– managing the group process, making sure everyone is involved, managing the process of setting up group rules and making sure they are kept, making sure that the goals and deadlines are met.
- b. Group communications– managing the communication process of the group and making sure everyone has the opportunity to talk and participate verbally. Making sure that informal processes and communication take place, responsible for involving all members in the process. Managing the interview process, deciding how and by whom questions are asked.
- c. Administrative activities - keeping administrative records of the meetings and of the interview, responsible for making the group appointments and appointment with the company.
- d. Academic integration – creating the academic background for the interview, getting the input from all members, managing the development of the questions that will be asked and responsible for tying in the interview with the academic materials.
- e. Researching the company and the person you will interview beforehand.
- f. Preparation of presentation – integrating all materials and preparing an engaging presentation of 8 minutes in English, which will be presented on Zoom.
- g. Presenting the finished product.

#### **6. Outline of the interview**

The following represents an outline for your interview. An interview is a two-way communication. The outline provides questions you should ask but by it should not restrict your freedom to ask additional questions, based on the feedback you receive by your interviewee. Fixing an interview with a busy manager is not easy and it is a real privilege to have this opportunity. Try to get the most of it! We expect you to be on time for the interview, to prepare adequately for it and to carry on the interview professionally. Be sure you take notes. In case you would like to record the interview, the interviewee needs to give a formal consent. You need to ensure the interviewee that the information provided will be dealt with confidentially and that it will be used only for the scope of the project. Please understand that the answers are discreet and confidential and need to be treated as such. Promise that the interview is for educational purposes and the information will be treated in a confidential way.

Before you start interviewing you need to:

- a. Research the company, read the internet site of the company, learn about the person you will be interviewing from previous interviews they conducted in public, and materials published on Google/ YouTube or other social media.
- b. Prepare your questions based on the reading materials, the things you learned in class and what you would like to learn from the interview.

- *General information*

How long have you been working in the company?

Describe your function. Are you leading an international team?

If you had to give a judgement on the diversity of people you are working with/leading (cultural, age, gender, religion...) would you say that the level of diversity is low/middle/high? Could you explain your answer?

- *Uncertainty and crisis*

We live in turbulent times. How does your company cope with uncertainty?

How do you cope with uncertainty?

Expressing uncertainty can be considered as lacking competence, and therefore something to be avoided. Studies indicate that it is difficult for people to process information about uncertainty and that such information might create disturbance and frustration and cause people to overestimate risk. What is your opinion and your experience on that?

Several studies reach the opposite conclusion: Being transparent about uncertainty and giving information about possible outcomes are thought to establish and strengthen trust or at least such communication does not appear to have negative effects on trust. What is your opinion and your experience on that?

How does your information behaviour (the way you search and use information) change during crises (explain what do you mean for crisis, ex: political polarization, trade conflicts, the climate crisis, armed conflicts, supply chain disruption...)?

From your experience, do diverse teams react better or worse to crises? Please explain.

How does the information behaviour of your employees change during the crisis? Are there differences in the behavior among various groups of people (gender, age, cultural background?)

What is your approach to communication (the way you correspond with people in your team and your organization) during turbulent times? Do you communicate more/less, what are the means of communications?

In your communication to your team do you try to reduce employee's anxiety, when you perceive that uncertainty is too high? If yes, how do you achieve this?

- Intercultural communication and diversity

When it comes to crisis communication and high level of uncertainty, case studies have shown that ethnic differences seem to escalate during crises. What is your experience on that respect?

When it comes to international crisis communication, is the cultural background/diversity of employees a relevant aspect to consider? Why?

Do you have the perception that employees perceive, read and make sense of critical situations in a different form?

The different cultural background/diversity gives plurality of perspectives; do you think that it is also an advantage in time of crisis?

How do you adjust your communication style to meet the needs of people in a culturally diverse work setting?

What do you do to develop relationships across cultures and to build diverse networks that are able to cope with uncertainty?

Considering your experience, what traits and skills do you think are most critical for communicating to a diverse audience in time of higher uncertainty?

Do you have some additional insights that you would like to share with us?

## **7. Learning outcomes**

The purpose of this project is to have you experience working in diverse, international teams, while working together on a common goal. The learning outcomes should be:

- a. Experience working in an international, culturally diverse team,
- b. Know how to use academic materials in order to interact with senior management,
- c. Reach meaningful conclusions from the interview you conducted,
- d. Being able to present your conclusions in a coherent way.

## 8. References

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