

CPA Australia Podcast – Leading International Teams

Transcript

Introduction: Hello, and welcome to the CPA Australia podcast. Your source for business, leadership and public practice accounting information.

Pablo Benitez: Welcome to the CPA Australia podcast. My name is Pablo Benitez, CPA. I'm a company accountant and a member of the Corporate Committee in Victoria. Today we are bringing you a podcast titled Working With International Teams. We feel that it's a very relevant topic in today's global market place, and in particular in Australia, given that we're trying to increase our trade relations with our neighbouring countries. Sometimes best laid plans don't go according to what we had intended, in order to try and clarify how we can plan better and manage better our expectations.

We're here today with Dr Martijn Van der Kamp, a teaching fellow from the Monash Business School. Martijn will introduce himself, and tell us a little bit about himself, his background, and how he can give us relevant advice on the topic.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Thank you Pablo. My name is Martijn Van der Kamp. I'm a teaching fellow at the Monash Business School. Thank you for having me on this podcast. It's nice to be here with you.

Pablo Benitez: Welcome.

Martijn Van der Kamp: I'm looking forward to spend this time with you, and talking about international teams, and relationships within the region. Asia but also beyond that potentially. A little bit about myself, I'm a lecturer at Monash Business School, and I've been there since September last year. I lecture into the MBA programme, and next to lecturing a large part of my work is doing research on teamwork, and a lot of that is on global teams.

Pablo Benitez: How do you get into international teams, can I ask you?

Martijn Van der Kamp: Of course. It's quite a bit of a longer story. It was not one moment that I thought I'm going to study international teams, and this is going to be my thing. I think it came about during my undergraduate. I was an international marketing management student, and I went to live in Paris for a while. That was the first international experience that I had, and I was very interested in how do you make that work? I remember walking into my classes in Paris, and everything was in French, and I had a really hard time keeping up, and-

Pablo Benitez: Sorry, where did you come from?

Martijn Van der Kamp: I was born in the Netherlands, and I lived there for the largest part of my life, and I was studying in Rotterdam at the moment, before doing that exchange.

Pablo Benitez: Okay.

Martijn Van der Kamp: I was there, and that was my first international experience, struggling a little bit with that, and it really got me interested in that international dynamic, and how does that work? That did not particularly yet capture my interest in team, so I went back to my university and followed my bachelor up with a master in strategy, so this is like late '90's, early 2000's. This is also the time where companies are outsourcing their IT to India, and where basically globalisation is a powerful force. This is growing, so I was really interested at that point at how companies collaborate, and what does it mean to outsource your IT department to India, for example?

It was my master thesis really that brought those interests together, and I thought if these companies decide to do outsourcing arrangements, or to set up a joint venture in China, it really comes down to the people on the ground that actually have to do this. The team of people in which the expertise is brought together, and they just have to figure it out, and that linked back to my experience in Paris, where I got stuck a little bit myself, if you like. I thought if I was stuck already basically studying in Paris, what is it like to work as a team in an international environment?

That really got me started, and that was in 2007 that I did my master thesis, and since then I've been working as a consultant. Working on different collaborations between companies. Not always international, but some of them were, and doing research in this area. A lot on diversity and conflict in teams.

Pablo Benitez: Okay. Excellent. Well, thank you for that. Okay, so I'm a project manager. I'm opening an office in an overseas location. I have a team, I have boarding passes, I'm almost there, I'm ready to go. What do I do first?

Martijn Van der Kamp: That's a good question, but I think the best advice that I can give you is already, it says on your t-shirt. It says hang in there.

Pablo Benitez: You guys can't see it, but that's what it says.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes. Brace yourself I'd say. This is not an easy task that's been given to you. You're the project manager of an international team, so I think the first thing that you'd have to work out is why are you actually going abroad? What is your team going to do? I think the first question that is often overlooked is do we actually need a team to do this? There's many things that one person can actually do better than a team, so I think that ... Well, if you're appointed a project manager we've already gone past that stage, but I think that asking the question whether you need a team is a very relevant question. Especially before going into an international market. Can one or two people do this? Yes or no, or

do I really need four or five or even more people to work together. But okay, so you've been appointed. Congratulations. That's great news. I hope it's been a good promotion for you.

Pablo Benitez: Thank you. I'm excited.

Martijn Van der Kamp: What do you do next? I think that there's a couple of things that you need to figure out. I think the first part is who are you going to appoint in your team, or who are the people that are already in your team? This is really relevant, because these people are going to make a difference. As I said, I realise that in these outsourcing arrangements it's the people on the ground that'll make the difference, so let's say that you have not selected them yet, so you are going to be the team manager, and you'll have to do this team selection. Who's going to be on your team?

I think as a first step into that question is to realise what your team needs to do, so what does your team need to do Pablo?

Pablo Benitez: For example, I've got a very exciting product. I like it, and I think my overseas market will be also excited to use that product. I've been using a distributor, but now I want to take matters into my own hands, and I want to set up a sales office. Maybe a logistics office as well. Maybe a few people just to, I suppose run things while using local supplies and contractors.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes. Exactly, so what you're saying is you're trying to set up a location in a country. We can talk about what that means in the country, but let's say you're going to a foreign country. By the sounds of it you need somebody with logistical expertise, you need somebody with probably financial expertise, marketing expertise, and yourself a manager to make sure that all happens. You might need somebody who really knows the local market very well.

Pablo Benitez: That someone, so obviously knowing a local market needed to be there, in my opinion. You can read as many books as you want and watch as many videos as you can, but does someone need to be from the country that I'm going to, or can that be someone that's here and things are, they're going to do okay? With the knowledge from, a textbook knowledge rather than natural knowledge, does that make a big difference?

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes. I would say it makes a very big difference, and I think it depends a little bit on whether you're a first time company that's going to do this. Are you the first manager in the company that's going abroad, or if there is already a lot of experience within the company that you can fall back on? That will already make a big difference, but let's say for now that this is the first time round that your company is going to move abroad. I think that the experience of the actual country is really important, and it could be somebody that is working for your company within Australia, and that knows the country very well because they are from there, or they have already worked there for another organisation, but

I think it's really important to have somebody who understands the context of the company, of the country that you're working in, the industry that you're working in. Especially within the country that you're going to.

Pablo Benitez: It could be possible that I created a team here, but at the same time I'm going there to recruit.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes, definitely, I would say. Definitely, so I think a lot of companies for a first time they would probably start a collaboration with a company there, because they already have the knowledge, they already have the context. As you say, for example, if you have been working with a distributor previously you might set up a separate venture with them, or you might start to first work in a more tight manner way. You have one of your people on the ground, working in the distributors' office for example, so that you can start to build that presence in that country. I think it's unlikely that you will enter into a new market, into a new place without having that context. You really need to understand where you are and who you're working with, who your customer is, what your market is about, so yes. You could definitely hire locally. I can definitely advise that to do, or at least work with locals.

Pablo Benitez: Okay. Thank you, so now we have a team, we have some members that are locally sourced, and maybe we have one or two people that are from the destination market. How do we start communicating with each other? What's a good technique to bring everyone together? That very first meeting.

Martijn Van der Kamp: I think that's a really good question, because this is a step that most teams skip, and what happens is that we assume that we know how to work in teams. We have most of the time, at least when I was in school, I was not taught about teamwork, other than being part of a soccer team or being part of any sports team really, but we do not learn a lot about teamwork. I think the first step that you need to do with your team is talk about the team, rather than just starting to work, and I think that's a mistake that's too often is made. Is just we have the people now-

Pablo Benitez: They're good at what they do, let them do it.

Martijn Van der Kamp: They're good at what they do, day one. We're going to hit the ground running, and I think if you hit the ground running in this case, I think you're going to fall on your face. I think the first thing that you need to establish is you as a manager might know why you brought all these people on board. They might all know why they're on board, but it does not necessarily mean that all team members know from all the other people why they are in the room.

Pablo Benitez: Fair enough. That's a case in a local team. It's not just international.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Exactly, and that's where I think it becomes like teamwork. I think especially if you're on location, I think you're still a local team to some extent. The only

difference there is that people speak different languages, and that they will have different expertise, and expertise often comes with a specific view at looking at a problem. For example, I was working in the ship building industry, and we're looking at the design and building of ships, and what you see is that the designer really looks at what makes the ship go fast, what makes this a beautiful ship, or how can it carry as much containers as possible, for example? They really look at the design and technical aspects of a ship, where probably if you would be the accountant on the project you would have a very different view of that same ship.

Pablo Benitez: That would, yes. How much money can that ship make me? That's my view on it.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Right. Exactly, and how little can it cost me in the process of building it?

Pablo Benitez: That's right, yes.

Martijn Van der Kamp: These are often competing objectives, so if the accountant starts talking with the engineer or with the designer, this is not a guarantee for success. This is often issues come about, so I think step one is really to understand who's on the team. Understanding what their backgrounds are, what the expertise is that they bring to the team, and understanding what that expertise means, because for example, and you can probably inform me better on this, as an accountant you would use specific systems, or you would need specific data to do your work. If I'm a designer I do not necessarily know what you need to do your work correctly, so it is up to you and the team to make explicit to me you know what? I need data, this, this and this, and I need it this often. I need monthly sales forecast, or I need all the invoices. I don't know. You probably know better than I.

Pablo Benitez: Okay, so I can relate to what sort of information as accountants we might need, or project managers, or whatever the roles we might be performing in that company, but say I'm on the floor, I need this information, but all of a sudden I'm dealing with people that maybe have different ways of interacting with us than I do and I find that my way of asking for that information is just not working, so how do I ... Do you have any techniques, anything that you used in the past to try and bridge that-

Martijn Van der Kamp: Where I was just going to is to explain, that I think especially forming a team contract upfront is really important, and this team contract is about what are we doing as a team? It means our goal is to sell, I don't know what your office is selling. You have a distributor-

Pablo Benitez: Say we're selling candies.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Alright, so we've got lollipops that need to be sold, so our goal is to sell 10,000 lollipops in the Indian market in the coming two months, so I think having that

goal really specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound, smart they say, really helps to create a common understanding, because often a manager comes in and he's got a clear understanding. He's got a mission that his boss gave him, and said you need to sell 10,000 lollipops in the first two months. You're like good. Let me try it, but then you come to the team, and again, it does not necessarily mean that everybody on the team is on the same page, because the lollipop distributor might just be thinking about I need to sell 10,000 units, and I can do that. How am I going to do that? They are already in a very different mindset than the accountant or the team manager in this case, so making explicit what you do as a team is very important.

The second step in this team contract is how will you go about doing things? A lot of the times you just get I'll just send you an email, and we just go from there, and we do not really think about what this means, and I think especially in the context of global teams, where we have geographical boundaries often, so let's say that you work in Australia and in India at the same time. There's geographical boundaries, there is time boundaries. Often there's a time difference, which results in a delay in communication, and we rely on for example email, or we rely on Skype or Zoom or whatever tool that you're using to communicate.

What happens is that we are sending messages via WhatsApp, we respond via email, and the thing is that if you and I are on a team the communication between us is really good, but we do not include the rest of the team, so we're not on the same page anymore, and especially with all these extra boundaries it makes it really difficult to stay on the same page. It is really a key aspect, is not only knowing what you'll do and what everybody brings to the team in accomplishing that, but is also about how are we going to work together? How often will we meet, and what media will we use to communicate? If we are onsite are we going to meet in a room, or are we going to meet in a café, or are we going to meet monthly, or are we going to meet weekly?

Pablo Benitez:

Okay. I was going to ask you about that. Obviously, I think this, what you're saying is that we, probably above all, need to advocate clarity and I suppose transparency in what the team is doing when they are deployed to an overseas location I suppose. It's interesting that you mentioned in the regularity of meetings the means of communication, because I suppose you could allow for that before you go away. You can have something in mind, at least.

It's interesting that you mention also that a lot of teams don't do this, but knowing that this is something that's important in the success or otherwise of the venture. It's a good first step I suppose, to even set it up from here, and you could even practice it from here before you go there.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes.

Pablo Benitez:

Okay. That's good. That's good to know.

Martijn Van der Kamp: The reason why people will not do this, because they think it's wasted effort, and that it cost too much time and effort to, and therefore money, to do this preparation carefully. This untested prediction, but my prediction is that every hour invested upfront, in really thinking through the details of this teamwork, is going to pay you back numerous times, because I think it will smoothen the path, and I can tell you every team that starts working together will come across many problems.

Pablo Benitez: Definitely.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Always, so if you already have the problems that you will run into as you start working, if you then also on top of that have the problems that you could have prevented upfront, that's a lot of problems to deal with, so if you really think through the mechanics if you like, of the teamwork upfront, it's going to make a big difference. It's going to make a very big difference.

Pablo Benitez: Good. Excellent. Now, you mentioned WhatsApp, you mentioned emails. Technology keeps advancing, and I suppose it's there to make our life easier, and I think to some extent it does. I read in a magazine not long ago that now you will have access to translators, that you can put in your ear and they'll translate automatically as you speak to someone. That makes a big difference. How do you find technology helping the integration of teams?

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes, there's so many different tools out there, that if there's a lot of companies relying on their own tools, that they will use there's Zoom, there's Skype, there's Lumio, Trello. All the different apps that you can think, and ... For example, the Google Translate application. I think what we really need to realise about these tools is that they're tools, and to give you an example, I've been working now with a global team. These are people from all over the world, so they're literally in six different time zones, and they have spent at least a couple of months trying to figure out what ...

The conversation in this team has been largely focused about what technology they would use and how they would use it, and to me, that is the wrong conversation. That's the other way around. That's the conversation wrong way around. I think the conversation that needs to be had first is what are we doing as a team and who is on the team? If we're all English speaking people why would we have a translation app, for example? Do not even have to look into that. On the other hand, if we do know that we have people from different cultures, different nationalities, maybe that might be a very useful thing to have. A really good tool that can translate on the spot when we communicate, so I think it's really about identifying what are the needs of the team, the communication needs, and how can technology fulfil those?

For example, we're now working with tools like Trello and Slack and Lumio, and I think they're really powerful tools, and they can help teams tremendously. I don't know if you're familiar with these tools. I think Trello can really help you do a great job on mapping the task of the team. It creates a clear dashboard

with the tasks on it, and as you ... Everybody can look at them and can check them off, and so it creates a really good shared understanding of where your team is at.

Lumio is a tool that helps people vote on decision making, Slack is a tool that helps people communicate, so there's all these different functions, but as you say, technology keeps evolving, and not everybody is on the same page with these technologies-

Pablo Benitez: No I know. Most definitely, yeah.

Martijn Van der Kamp: So if you have people of different generations or of different cultures working together, it can take them quite a while before they're used to using this technologies, so again, I think it's really understanding about where are your team members at? If they are really good at using email and it will take them, and I can assure you, it will take quite a while for them to get on top of all these different tools, and be fluent in them. It might be really worthwhile to just stick to email for example, so I think that have an awareness of what tools are out there. Really look carefully about what you need to do with your team, and who your team members are, and then pick them carefully. I think if you pick the right ones they can help you greatly, but if they do not fit your team they cause more trouble than they solve.

Pablo Benitez: Fair enough. I think it comes back to what we spoke before about preparation. A good project manager might look at those tools before going, decide which ones suit the team, and maybe even train before they are deployed, I suppose, because that will help that immensely once you're there.

Martijn Van der Kamp: I think there's a bit of a risk in doing all the preparation upfront as well, because if you do not know who you're going to be collaborating with you do not know what their experiences are, or what tools they might already be working with, for example. I think the trick really is about thinking carefully about where you want to go, what you need from a company or a partner that you want to work with, think carefully about what kind of team members you need to do your task, and then go out. Then once you have established a team and you know who you're working with, then really start thinking about how does this team function, because it's really dependent on who is in the team and what their experiences are, what their knowledge is, et cetera.

Then you can start figuring that out, so I think a mistake that's been made a lot, especially about let's say five to 10 years ago, and a lot of companies started outsourcing their IT for example, to India, is that they started dictating a lot of the Indian suppliers about how they wanted to work with the supplier. Telling them what to do and instructing them into detail, where I think a lot of these suppliers already by then had at least 15, 20 years of experience in doing that. They knew far more about the technologies that were available, how to use them, how to develop the software, so I think that having an understanding about who you're working with is really important in rolling these things out.

Pablo Benitez: Okay. Definitely. When you're hiring, for example, for a team, covering the technical aspect, obviously you're able to do the job, you're a great accountant, you're a great engineer, you're a great salesperson. There will be cultural differences obviously, and this is one of the main points of this topic, working with international teams. Do you advise looking for certain personalities, or are you focusing just on the skillset of the person? Is there a certain type of personality that will work better in certain places, or otherwise will not work well in certain places?

Martijn Van der Kamp: I think that depends a bit on the function that you're looking for. I think there's the team manager or leader, and we can talk a bit about that role in a minute. I think that there's special requirements for that person, and then there's people that are on team. I think that foremost the people that you're looking for are people that have at least some kind of international experience, and at least have a willingness to work with people from other countries, but foremost are also content experts, so they're just good at what they do. You need somebody who understands logistics to be able to sell, to come up with the logistics for this company, for lollipops.

I think foremost it is expertise, and all the other regular requirements. I do think that international experience is helpful, because it does create a mindset for people that is a bit more open, a bit more understanding and a bit more patient in general, so they will not ... When somebody says something that's maybe not as appropriate as you'd like, that they would not immediately put the brakes on or the opposite, so I think that international experience there is an important one.

I think especially for those people, and it depends again a little bit on how you set it up, but it is also important that they understand your company, and that they understand the country a little bit. That they are going to, that they understand the local market, and I think especially if you're a first timer it's really important to set that up appropriately.

Pablo Benitez: Okay. Thank you. In terms of the cultural differences in particular, and they could be pretty small. It could be, and I'm Argentinian, so I even coming here from Argentina at the age of 18, there were certain differences that I had to adjust. As a student, and then as employee of the company, and they were pretty minor I suppose. Maybe one time we have dinner, how we entertain, the relationships that we have with maybe friends and family, but not that big, but you have those little differences.

Maybe in Europe, in Spain they might want to slow down a little bit in the afternoon, and then dial it up a notch again towards the evening, but other cultures have very big differences. They're not just what time we go to sleep, or what sort of meals we have at night, so how do you deal with those? We could be doing business in India, in China, in Saudi Arabia, or in the United States, and each country will have its own sets of challenges. You can't train ... Do you train in the same way, or do you-

Martijn Van der Kamp: I would say yes. I think there's a couple of things that I want to say about this. One I think is that culture is a really tricky one. Especially if you start researching culture online or even from textbooks, whatever. They will tell you culture X is like this, and Chinese do this, and Americans don't like this, and it's just not true. On average, and there's certainly a value in understanding what has been said there, but the biggest risk is that you create all these sort of stereotypes or beliefs about this society before you go in. If you look at China, China is not one culture. It is a whole blanket of different cultures and different, and from there - If we look at China as a whole, it's really hard to look at it as a whole. Then if you look at a province, you could say maybe that's a little bit more consistent. It probably is, but then we get down to the level of organisational culture, and even different departments or business units within organisations could be the exact opposite of what the national culture is, so I think that in order to prepare for that, I think that there is different things to do.

Let me first finish about culture. I think that the reason of value in training, in cultural training. The value is only there when it's done properly, and what happens a lot is that cultural training is about presenting the differences between culture A and culture B, and that sticks with us, so what happens? We go to China, we've got all these ideas about what the Chinese are like, and what their habits are, and what their customs are, and we look for confirmation, and we use it to say that's so different from how we are.

A friend of mine worked at a big bank in the Netherlands. He was working with India, and what happened there is that the two groups were together, worked together quite well, so they were from India in the Netherlands, but during lunchtime the food that the Indian people ate was quite different from the food that the Dutch people ate. I'm not sure if you know what the Dutch people eat over lunch, but it's the most boring thing ever. It's just wholemeal sandwiches and cheese.

Pablo Benitez: I'll take your word for it! [laughs]

Martijn Van der Kamp: If you contrast that with the colourful, flavourful food and the smell associated with that food, it's a huge contrasting difference. What happened here is that these two groups would have lunch on separate times, just because they did not really understand each other's' food culture, and what happens is, and this is a bit of a side effect, is that this causes ... Let's say that they have lunch for half an hour, an hour. They spend more time with their own group for half an hour or an hour per day. The Indians and the Dutch.

It means that the social networks within both groups developed very differently. It also means that they start developing as two groups, rather than as one group. The trick with cultural training is really to not only point out the differences, but to give people skills on how to deal with those differences, and the last step is really practise those skills. Before you go and do it, to understand not only what the skill is, but how you apply that skill, and that's the only way that researchers effective cultural training can be done.

I wouldn't say do not pay attention to culture at all, but I think it's a bit overemphasised. I think especially, I think the best thing to do is just to assume that you know nothing about another culture. Just go in with an open mind, and ask a lot of questions, and I think you can take cultural frameworks, there's Hofstadter's values that you can take in. You can say you know what? I'm here in China. Conscientiousness or collectivism are supposedly very high in this country.

Pablo Benitez: Sorry, you mentioned a set of values. A theory that-

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes, so Hofstadter is a very ... It's been around a long time. It's about cultural dimensions, and I don't think that we really have enough time to go into all of them, but let's say there is a skill that is about individualism and collectivism, so for example, the United States would be a highly individualistic culture, where many Asian countries would be seen as highly collectivist countries, so they look after each other. They form dense social networks, and your position within that network is really important. Where individualism, for example, in the United States. The idea is that growth is more merit based, depending on your position in the network, so you can earn your way up to the top, for example. Those are two fundamental differences between those two cultures.

I think there's value in that, but I would not take ... It's a word for it, so I think the value is you can look up cultural frameworks, and whatever one you'll find will give you a grip on something. For example, I think an interesting one would be 10 common mistakes to make in China. There's probably 10, 15, maybe even hundreds of YouTube videos on this.

Pablo Benitez: That's right, yes.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Write them down. Write 10 of those mistakes down. Go to your Chinese business partner and say this is what I read online. How do you relate to this? They will say yeah. They might laugh about it and say none of that's true, or they might say, "I understand that one," or yes. That's true, and you can say how does that affect our relationship and our team? I think having that willingness to have that conversation within your team, I think that's the key to teamwork. It is really trying to understand what are the differences here, and how do these differences matter? You can assume about the differences, or you can ask your partner about what the differences are, and I think that is exactly what a lot of people don't do.

They go in, they do a lot of training, they go in with this fixed mindset saying these are the differences that I need to work with. How am I going to do that? They refrain from discussing it with their team members, or with the organisation that they are working with, so sitting down around the table and just saying this stereotype about Argentinians. Is it true? There's a stereotype about Dutch that they're all rude and direct. I think it's true, and-

Pablo Benitez: Well, I'm not feeling that here in this room.

Martijn Van der Kamp: I wouldn't say that they're all, and I think this is exactly the truth. They're not all rude and direct. On average maybe, yes, and I think that they're more direct than they are rude, but it is an interesting conversation to have, because if you are going into a cultural training, somebody tells you on average these Dutch guys are really rude. Really direct. Watch your words, or they'll slap you in the face with it. I think it's a very open and honest conversation to say Martijn, I'm working with you. You're a Dutch guy. I read that Dutch people are very open and direct. Does that relate to you? Do you relate to that value or to that norm? I'd say no. I'm actually quite a shy guy, or no. Totally. I'm very direct, and you better watch out.

Pablo Benitez: Well, I guess preconceptions, stereotypes, they happen everywhere within countries, international cultures. Even within your own family I suppose, so I think that goes back to open dialogue and open communication, and even I think that's hard to do on an individual level. Not even going overseas and working with different teams, so it's a skill that if we can train it in companies not only going away somewhere, but also within Australia, that would be very beneficial actually. Not to assume, I suppose.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes, and I would agree. I think that these are the essential, this touches into the soft skills or the more interpersonal skills, and they are really difficult and they only come with practice. I think that's exactly the reason why a lot of people do not easily go into them. Even, it was probably about two months ago. I attended a talk on giving feedback. It's probably talk number 50 in my life that I've seen on giving feedback, and being training, giving feedback. Am I excellent on giving feedback? No. Do I learn something new every time I go to a talk on feedback? Yes. Completely, and I think that's also the nice thing about these skills. Is that you can keep getting better at them.

I agree with you. I think it'd be very good for a lot of people in business in general, to be trained in skills like transparency and communication, feedback giving, and trying to have these more specific conversations, because a lot of people talk about having open communication and about being transparent. We just need communication, what does that mean and how are you going to do that? That's why this initial conversation is so important. Sit down and say what types of conversations do we need to have? We need to talk about what we're doing as a team, we need to talk about how we're going to work together, and then we need to make it how we're going to make it happen, and then the last step is what actions are we going to take to actually get there?

I think that's the preparation part, and then you end up in actually doing the work that you're working on, and then it really comes down to having the conversations that you've planned, and I think especially important in international teamwork is that, and I see it with our MBA students as well. Is that people from different countries, I'm thinking if we have people from Argentina on this. We've got many South American countries, we've got Asian

countries, and we put people in highly diverse teams. The thing is that not everybody is really fluent in English, and they do not sit around the table and can participate completely as a team member, so ... Yeah?

Pablo Benitez: I was going to say I can relate to that, because again, I see it within my own community and my own family. That they can be two different people while they speak their native language and then when they speak English, so they almost transform. You see them almost differently, because they don't talk about the same things. Even the posture and how freely they speak.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Exactly, and just I think it was only last week I had a conversation with one of the students, and he was feeling a bit down, and he said, "Actually, I feel like a completely different person. If I try to express myself here I struggle. In my home country I can explain everything. I would be the communicator on the team, I would be the extrovert. I would relate to anyone, and now I'm here and I struggle to communicate within the team."

Let's say I think this is the typical team that we're having in our programme. Is we have one, two, possibly three Australians. We have got two, three international people from all over the world, and roughly half of them is male and the other half is female. We've got quite a nice balance there, and people from all different industries. We have got accountants, marketeers, everything, doctors.

Again, these people are ... You've just come off the aeroplane, from China, Peru, and you're being put in this team. You are in a situation where you're setting up your life, and I think that this is very common in a lot of international teams, where people are expats or where they are only temporarily here in Australia to work with Australian companies. You are trying to get yourself set up, so you need to arrange a Medicare card or find an apartment, or do all these things that you would normally not have to do, because in your own country you already have all those things. Then you have to step into this ...

It's often complex work. A lot of companies, the things that we do are not really easy, and do not really come easy to a lot of people, so they really have to be switched on about what they're doing, and they do not have the support network that they would have when they are working in their own homes or in their own countries, whereas the Australian team members are alright. They already have their house set up, they've got their families here. If they're a bit stressed out at work they can just talk to the partners, to the children, to whoever is around, so I think a lot of people don't really realise the struggles that some people have in the team, that are not even necessarily related to the work that they're doing. Just to the language barrier. To the lack of a social network around them. Then it's easy to talk over people that do not have those language skills.

Pablo Benitez: Do you think the reverse could help them? I'm an Australian, I go to Japan. I know nothing about Japan. I've had a bit of training as you said, I've prepared

myself, I've practiced. I read books, I ate Japanese food here. I land in Japan, all of a sudden I shut down. I don't speak Japanese, I don't know anyone. People are not willing to converse with me. All of a sudden I've fallen behind. I'm not working well. It's a problem.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Completely.

Pablo Benitez: I guess we go back to again, communication, and how important is it to create a social network outside of your workplace when you set up an office elsewhere? You could be the best at what you do here. I could be the greatest accountant in Australia. Not far behind, by the way, but if I get to Japan, all of a sudden I'm not thinking about numbers. I'm thinking about I've got nothing to do on the weekend. I'm not even looking forward to the weekend, because I don't know what to do.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Exactly. Just sitting there in your room, focusing on the numbers, and the only thing you're doing is focusing on numbers before you know it. I think it's important if you're an expat, I think it is important to not have just your work. I think that if there's one thing that keeps people going, it is social networks. It is connections to family, to friends. It is feeling valued and appreciated by other people, and the same goes for within the team.

I think that what we often do not ... What happens in these international teams is that we do not give each other enough space, so if you are moving to Japan and you do not speak Japanese, what happens is that, and this would depend on the Japanese culture, because I think they function quite differently than the Australian culture.

Let's say that they would basically take over. They will keep talking or they will say nothing, because they're waiting for you to talk. The whole team dynamic becomes a bit complicated. I think especially what we see here is that the native speakers in the team have the tendency to take over, because they're fluent, they understand it, they have the grasp of it, and they will sometimes ask their team members what do you think? Then you struggle and you say something, and they said that's a great idea, but doesn't really fit with what we're doing. Sorry Pablo, but keep trying. It was a good idea.

One of the things that you can do within the team is to agree upon this little process around the table at every meeting. If we are talking about a distribution strategy, or about making up the accounts or whatever, is that everybody runs the team, gets two minutes or three minutes or whatever, to say whatever they want to say, so we know that everybody is being heard in the team, and they have equal input. We could even recognise, I don't know if somebody's language skills are not really up to par with the others in the team, to give them three minutes, instead of two minutes. I think that establishing those little processes really helps transparency, and that shared understanding of where everybody's at in the team, and to get this communication ... Get everybody equally represented.

Pablo Benitez: In terms of, I suppose that's great for the workplace. Are you responsible for your teams social development? Is that something that a company needs to look after as well, or is it each to their own, nine to five or nine to seven, depending on where you are, or nine to nine? After that, is it still the company's responsibility to make sure they're okay, or-

Martijn Van der Kamp: I don't know. I think that legally it is probably within their responsibility, so I think that's one answer to it. From a legal point of view you don't have to do anything I guess. That's up to their ... It's their life, so they can do whatever they want, and some people would say who are you to interfere with that life? I think that-

Pablo Benitez: In terms of enabling someone to integrate themselves into that culture, for say three months, six months or 12 months, it's invariably you'll probably be hanging out with your own team, I would imagine. To begin with anyway, but as I said, if all of a sudden I'm finding nothing to do because I can't integrate, and then that's affecting my work performance, and there must be a benefit for the company to enable some sort of social interaction as well as from a work performance point of view.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Certainly. Completely. I think from both social and an economical point of view, I think it's worthwhile investing and helping these people be successful. To have your employees be successful, regardless of whether they are working inside the company or whether that's outside the company, I think if you can support these people in their success they are the best performers, and this is what research shows again and again and again. Is that people that have social connections, that feel that have a good wellbeing, that feel connected and appreciated, they just outperform anyone else, so I think if you can facilitate that and it depends if this is the first time that you're going abroad. Maybe, and you do not really have as an organisation, not have these networks, the thing that you can ask very simply is how are you doing?

I think it's a very easy question. How are you doing outside of work, is everything fine? If they say, "Yes, I'm completely happy," that's good. You can even ask them, "What do you do outside of work?" They say, "I've found this group of people that I really like hanging out with," and you could remember that for the next time when you send somebody out and say previous person X had a really nice group. Maybe you can hang out with those people.

If you have a bit more experience you might already have a whole network of things that you might want to look into. Give people places to exercise, to socialise, to basically do all those things. You can pinpoint people in the right direction, and I think it's really important, and it makes economical sense.

Pablo Benitez: Fair enough. Now, I just want to bring you to a touchy point I suppose, because we talk a lot about corporate culture here in Australia, and how important it is for the teams. The members of an organisation to follow the creed of that particular company. Now, we want to transfer that to whichever country we

move into. We have certain beliefs and certain ... We do things a certain way, but maybe we clash.

In that particular country they don't do things the same way we do them. It may be in the way people speak to each other might be different, and we don't agree with that say, for example. How do you overcome that? That's a tricky one, because you don't want to go into a country and all of a sudden say you know what? This is the way we need to do things. You need to change, but at the same time you don't want to compromise your culture.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yes, so the answer will differ a lot on whether you're working with another organisation, or whether you're setting up your own organisation in a country. If you are going to work with an existing organisation, I think there's different degrees on how far you can go there. You can keep this other organisation at arms length, and just say you're a supplier or vendor or whatever to us. You do not necessarily need to be the same as us. We think that these practices or principles or values could really benefit you too, and you could have a conversation about how you would do that.

It could also go further into a joint venture arrangement, or you could even take over the company if you wanted to. As soon as you take over the company it's yours, and it's up to you to decide what you want to do with it. If you plan to have a presence in China or in India for the coming years, it's worthwhile investing in its culture.

I think that we need to realise that changing a culture is a very long term process. It's not just a matter of weeks and months. This is a matter of years, so I think it needs careful consideration, about whether it is desirable at all to do, and it needs consideration about what, if anything, what would you like to change? What are the most important aspects? I think that culture you can divide in several layers of culture. You can look at what does the building look like, or what kind of language do people speak, or you can also look at even the coffee mugs that they have on the table. Are they all branded by the organisation that they're here for, or are they just random cups?

They all say they all give you indications about strong this culture is, yes or no, all the way down to the deeper laying values and beliefs that people have about a company, and this is almost like national goals. Becomes quite profound.

Pablo Benitez: It does, yes.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yeah, and this is exactly where the tricky part is, because the national culture can be one way, but the organisational culture can be the exact opposite, so if you assume that people within that company are making assumptions about these people based on national culture, you might be completely wrong based on their organisational culture. They might be a very progressive company in a

very conservative country. I think if you be careful about what you want to change, and-

Pablo Benitez: Do you almost sacrifice your values sometimes? Do you need to? We all hear about stories of companies work overseas, that need to sacrifice values that otherwise would have here in their home country?

Martijn Van der Kamp: Well, I would say never sacrifice on your values. I think that if there's one thing that you can have in your life it's values, and those guide you. Those guide every organisation and what they do, and how they all do things, so I think that not soon should be given on our values. I think that the thing to consider is what is the goal that we need to achieve here? I can tell you I met a team leader of a software development team, and he said to me, "I will only put together a diverse team of people, if the contract is more than \$100,000 and over six months. If it's shorter than that time or is it less, to me, less than that value, for me it's not worthwhile putting in the effort of making a diverse team work."

I would just go in with four Australian guys and girls, and I think it's a bit the same with culture. The question is what do you need to get out of this? Is this really important? Is this culture so important to you that you need to transform it completely? Well, then give yourself some time to do it. Otherwise, maybe keep them at a little bit further distance and collaborate, rather than to try and make it your own. Even if it is your own subsidiary, you can take over a company. Nobody says that you have to make it exactly like your company in Australia. You can negotiate with the people there and say this is our company value. You can decide together what would work in the specific context of that country, for example. Does that make sense?

Pablo Benitez: Yeah, it does make sense, and I think what you're saying is that if you put it in position where you need to sacrifice those values, and you're not going to do that, because you feel very strongly about them, then I guess you don't do business there-

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yeah, or you bought the wrong company, so I think that's the other aspect of it. Is be really careful on who you work with, and these large countries there's many companies to work with, and it's better to look a little bit further for a company that is willing to go through that change, if you really need it to be like your company, or decide on what are your core values and where you can play around with a little bit more? What are the things that are maybe a little bit further away from your organisational heart, if you like?

Pablo Benitez: Fair enough. Martijn, I think I might have questions for this podcast, but is there anything that you want to say before we go?

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yeah. If you don't mind, I'd briefly like to get back on the role of the manager in this-

Pablo Benitez: Yeah, sure.

Martijn Van der Kamp: In a team, because I think that the manager is a bit different than the person, than the other people on the team. I think that the manager really needs to have that international experience, but I think most importantly this manager needs to be a boundary spanner, and I think you can only span ... With boundary spanner I mean somebody that bridges national cultures, and that bridges organisational cultures where needed. That's able to spend those time differences, and so that person needs to have qualities and experience that reflect that. Either they have done this before, or have somebody guide them who has done this before.

Pablo Benitez: It's a facilitator, an enabler, someone that-

Martijn Van der Kamp: It's exactly that. The only role of this leader or manager is to facilitate this team, and this team is going to go through a rocky road, because ... I think that the leader is in a unique position, because they have got ties to leadership. Especially if this is across organisational boundaries, which I think a lot of companies start off that way, in their international team work. Is that especially across organisations they've got ties to higher management, within both, one or both organisations, on both sides of the pond. They have got connections to the people on both sides, and to the larger organisations, and I think it is their specific role to make sure that the procedures and processes that these organisations have, which are often at odds with each other, and the cultures that these organisations that are often at odds with each other. That they do not block the progress of this team too much, and the most important thing that they do is by creating what they call a third culture. Is by really making sure that there is a separate relational identity, and that's the team that they're working with. You are not really part of company A, and you're not really part of company B, or you're not really an Australian team, but you're also not really an Indian team. You are the team that spans the bridge between the two, and what do we need to accomplish our task, and which company is going to help us do that?

I was working with a telecom company and their HR outsourcing provider. The outsourcing provider is very technical one, very process focused, where the telecom company was quite I would say more innovative, or a bit more free and open. I think if you can really pinpoint what is needed there, for some aspects of the work that they needed, specifically the software development part, they needed a lot of structure and process, so they could better rely on the structures that the vendor had in this case. Where for the innovation part, which was really interesting for both as well, they were better off relying on the structures that the other company had.

It's really trying to pinpoint what do I need from this company, what do I need from that company? Often they have goals that are competing, as we talked about with the accountant in the team and the designer for example. In this case it was the same. One company's got innovation goals, budget is not as

important. The other company was really a factory if you like, budget was really important, so as a team leader you really are the person that has to make those tensions work, so I think for those leadership roles it requires a bit of expertise to, a bit of experience to manage all those tensions.

The other interesting thing is if we put long term managers on this, so people that have worked for company A for 30 years and are senior management, they often relate very strongly to the company, which is most of the time does not work in favour for the relationship, because they are too, how do you say? They defend their own company more than they care about the other company, so you're better off putting new people on a team like that. That have come from another company. That have not chosen a side yet, if you like. That are really able to span those bridges.

Pablo Benitez: Thank you for that. I believe you wanted to talk to us about a masterclass that's open to the public about this particular topic, if they wanted to know more about it?

Martijn Van der Kamp: Yeah. Before we close off. Thank you for bringing that up. On August 17 there is a masterclass that is called the Sum of All Fears. Managing Teams on Complex Global Partnerships, and we will elaborate on the topic that we're talking about today. It will be in 271 Collins Street, and I think it will soon be up on the website of the Monash Business School, where the events are listed. It's a free event, so everybody who's interested to come along please do, and I hope to see many faces there in the room.

Pablo Benitez: Thank you, thank you very much for coming in today, talking to us, and thank you to our members for listening. Hopefully this is going to give a little bit more guidance whether you are in the process of setting up a team, thinking about it, or maybe in 10 years' time, when you finally get that promotion overseas it might help then. Thank you very much.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Hang in there Pablo.

Pablo Benitez: Thank you.

Martijn Van der Kamp: Thank you Pablo-

Pablo Benitez: Cheers, thank you Martijn.

Martijn Van der Kamp: For having me on the podcast today.

Pablo Benitez: You're welcome.

Outro: To download a transcript and find more information on today's episode, visit www.cpaaustralia.com.au/podcast/15