

**'Extending the faultline model to geographically dispersed teams: How colocated subgroups can impair group functioning'** by Jeffrey T. Polzer, C. Brad Crisp, Sirkka L. Jarvenpaa, and Jerry W. Kim in *Academy of Management Journal*, 2006, Vol. 49 (4), 679-692.

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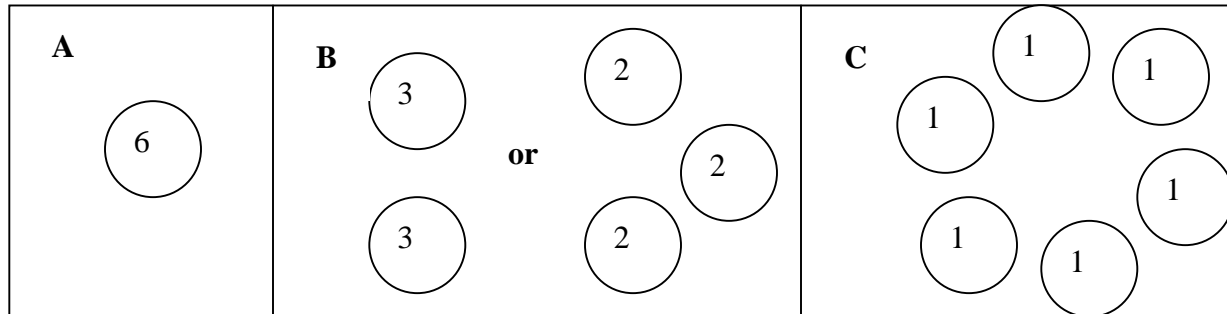
Over the years, teams have become a pseudo-mandate in accomplishing organizational missions, whether operating in corporate, government, or non-profit arenas. In a recent article Freedman (2006) states "*the primacy of groups and teamwork is so ingrained that we seldom stop to think about it anymore*" (p. 61). He goes on to make an argument as to how collaboration is one of the hottest buzzwords in business today, but it does not work. This is a staunch reminder that while the concept of group work is very attractive, it also needs to be properly planned for and managed. In addition to simply assembling a team, academic research and practical applications have reminded us of the need to consider primary diversity factors such as demographics, skill sets, and organizational affiliations. The authors introduce yet another critical concept, geographical locations to be factored in creating functional teams with respect to performance, trust, and conflict management.

The authors use the concept of *faultlines* as articulated by Lau & Murnighan (1998) which represent "*hypothetical dividing lines that may split a group into subgroups based on one or more attributes*" (p. 328). So, for example, a workgroup of three men and two women may experience a 'faultline' along gender. The value in understanding faultlines is that the smallest of differences can trigger them, even in seemingly homogenous groups, and may lead to unintended, negative consequences, such as lack of trust and difficulties with conflict management. Accordingly, geographic diversity then must be considered for its possible effect on group function and performance within geographically dispersed teams. In addition, the authors discuss that when dispersed teams divide work, co-location is considered a natural, rational segregation factor for establishing subgroups. However, these very subgroups enhance the probability of redundant work, conflicting decisions, and false perceptions of outside contributions. Therefore geographic diversity should be factored in along with the other considerations when team effectiveness and performance is the ultimate goal.

The current analysis concentrated on configurational dispersion, which considers the number of locations and number of team members at each location. Figure 1 is a visual depiction of configurational dispersion. At one end of the scale are fully colocated teams (A) in which all the team members reside in the same location. The other end of the scale represents teams that are fully dispersed in which each member resides at a different site (C). Occupying the middle ground are partially dispersed teams (B).

**Figure 1:**

### Geographic Diversity Variations



Using face-to-face and computer mediated interactions, the authors investigate how various configurational dispersions impact group functioning in terms of conflict and trust. The authors also explore the concept of faultlines being generated by nationality based sub-groups in the same location.

The survey design utilized 266 graduate business students located at fourteen universities in ten countries on four continents. Each participant was assigned within a group of five or six for a total of 45 teams. The teams engaged in a seven-week project with a number of activities, deliverables, and feedback mechanisms to assess and capture participant interaction, particularly web based tools (surveys, listservs, and so forth).

The following results were reported:

- Members had better relations with their colocated peers than with distant peers.
- Teams with two co-located subgroups, and therefore more co-located peers, had more conflict and less trust than fully dispersed teams, both overall and among only distant members.
- Geographic distance between subgroups evoked more conflict and less trust when subgroup members were homogeneous with respect to nationality.

### Implications for Managers

Based on these findings and prior research, a number of considerations are proposed for limiting the impact of faultlines:

1. Careful member selection is important in forming a team, especially in regards to both demographic and geographic characteristics.
2. Emphasize a strong collective identity and personal interactions across the *whole* group.
3. Establish and maintain structures to support *full* team communication.

This article suggests a powerful reminder to the various organizations which value diverse opinions and attempt to use virtual, network, or collaborative arrangements to manage team projects. Case in point can be observed within the twenty-eight page special advertisement supplement in which a number of very prominent U.S. corporations articulated their diversity policies or strate-

gies (“Leading with diversity,” 2005). Of the companies represented only four specifically discussed how geographic diversity and connectivity is valued in the organization: Accenture Ltd. (108); Bayer Corporation (110); Johnson Controls International (111); and Novo Nordisk, Incorporated (125). This non-explicit identification by the remainder of the companies is either a mere oversight or further reinforcement that geographic considerations are not valued nor recognized as potential detractors from team trust and conflict management.

Another implication of this article emerges when one considers the emphasis that undergraduate and graduate business schools are placing on collaborative work and dispersed teams, especially across international boundaries. InfoWorld’s Dan Tynan (2006) acknowledges this phenomenon by stating “*If you think managing a team in the cube farm down the hall is a challenge, try doing it across 12 time zones. As teams become both more virtual and global, IT managers will need to collaborate with colleagues in multiple locations, often working at different times of the day*” (p. 20).

While the major organization research literature highlights certain key considerations to be understood in creating teams or assigning group work, geographic location has not been fully analyzed. Modern times would suggest that if the goal is to get the best yield for our collaborative efforts, then we must first consider all potential detractors, which include geographic location among dispersed teams.

## REFERENCES

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