

Chapter Eleven

International Teams in the Future Scheme of Things

This chapter first summarises the key messages in this book. However, if managers are then hoping for a bulleted summary of the future, we have left that task to others. We choose to first look at three views of the future, one based on technology, one on the quality of the natural environment and one on the quality of human interaction. We show how including all of them in a view of the future, challenges many of the stereotypes that create the problems outlined in Chapter Three. We then briefly consider how technology will change the way people will work and interact. However, we then abandon practicalities and end by imagining how some of the ancient and emerging scientific disciplines and analogies can allow us to look at these teams from different angles. These may well deepen our understanding of how to harness and celebrate the richness inherent in our differences.

The Key Messages in the Book

This book is about creating the organisational capacity to manage globally by using international teams effectively. It has fallen into two parts. The first section is aimed directly at existing or potential international team members and leaders. It describes in some detail the knowledge and skills that he or she will need to be effective. The second section recognises that the effectiveness of an international team will depend on the organisational context. If teams are to be successful, then key people within that organisation have to actively ensure that the cultural norms, unwritten rules, organisational systems and structures and the human resources functions are supporting and facilitating each team.

This leads to what we have termed the systemic approach. This is one where the organisation creates a cascade of learning and experimentation that supports and enables these teams to work together. It demands a huge commitment to change any part of the old organisational processes that hinder these teams being successful. In Wellcome, for instance this meant a complete rethink of the role of a project leader, of human resources and the development of an international facilitation network.

The key messages for international team leaders and members

International teams are more complex than national teams in four key ways:

- 1 The different nationalities within the team are likely to create greater communication difficulties and different expectations.
- 2 The organisational contexts and balance of power may exacerbate those difficulties.
- 3 An international team is likely to be working on a complex broad target that has significant impact on the future profitability of the company.
- 4 It will also probably do much of its work on communication technology while being spread across large distances and time zones.

This means that there will be many facets to the leader's role. A leader cannot abdicate responsibility for getting the work done, however, with the help of a facilitator, the team members can soon learn to take responsibility for maintaining effective interaction that supports the task. This leaves the team leader freer to act as the conduit between the team, key stakeholders and the organisation as a whole and to promote the team within the organisation.

A team leader benefits from understanding the many different ways in which cultural differences can influence the interaction within the team. By anticipating difficulties and having the ability to look below the surface at the root causes of some problems, the team leader can assist and be assisted by a good facilitator in keeping communication effective. Not only that, but he or she will also have a key role in diffusing the inequalities that will also hinder effective interaction. A set of timely useful practices have been described in Chapter Four which support the interaction and teamwork throughout the team's life cycle.

Because the team is probably geographically dispersed, a team leader has to work out with good information technology experts what technology can best support the team's task. Much can be achieved by using relatively simple existing technologies, eg telephone, fax, e-mail effectively. However, especially in the case of building documents and designs at a distance, shared replicative databases and document exchange facilities are very helpful. The team leader has the responsibility of establishing a disciplined rhythm of working together face to face and working apart. In doing so he or she needs to work out what needs to be done in expensive face-to-face time and to establish a common agreement on how to work apart.

International teams do not exist separately from the organisations, which created them. The team leader needs support from key people and must be clear about what that could be. Senior managers should have explained very clearly how the team's purpose fits in with the overall strategy and have provided supportive resources and infrastructure. The team leader should understand the criteria upon which he or she was selected and have agreed workable expectations with senior management. If senior management is difficult, it is advisable to create a network of international leaders to lobby for adequate

support and a sane lifestyle. It is a job that can be highly rewarding and stimulating as well as turn into an eighteen-hour a day nightmare.

The key messages for team sponsors, CEO's, human resources and line managers

International teams help a company most when they are working towards a meta-target that will have a dramatic impact on organisational profits and knowledge. A target that also needs high initial investment and a longer time frame for a much bigger financial impact. A drip by drip approach to supporting and investing in these teams is unlikely to be sustainable. ABB has been successful because it took a dramatic step ten years ago, and persisted. BP Exploration put aside £13 million for its virtual teamwork project and gave them five years to become internally self-sustaining. Other European business leaders have recently rated these two companies as Europe's two most admired companies. Perhaps the motto is 'only the brave survive'.

The top teams have to mirror what they want to see happen in the company as a whole. Their cultural make up will represent the company's global spread and they will be actively learning and demonstrating how to work across large distances. As they create their global visions of expansion and profitability they also need to think through the 'how?'. Human resources and organisation development experts need to be equal partners in the top-level discussions. Teams in these departments will also be culturally mixed and practising what they preach.

The structure of international teams needs to be workable. We have demonstrated that being a 'hopping' line manager three weeks here, three weeks there, does not work. However, an international project leader can lead a team spread across the globe, especially if there are strong counterparts in each location. The key is discipline and rhythm in communication and decision making and using what is available in communication technology effectively.

There needs to be enough international teams to create a critical mass*. Companies with enough critical mass will create flexible common systems, update them and have a project dedicated to exploring the potential impact of new technologies. These companies will have a huge advantage over others taking a slower road.

There needs to be a standard, but flexible model of best practices and interventions for international teams which allows for a wide range of specific interventions to be used in any cultural context at the appropriate time. Just as human resource/training teams in different locations within the same company have to forge a common but flexible approach, so do human resource/training and support teams across strategic alliances. New international teams need to be

* Many organisations have different standards, policies and technologies at locations around the world. This is not ideal, but has to be recognised as the starting point for many organisations.

facilitated and fully supported until the learning becomes systemic within the organisation. This may well take five to ten years.

If the number of middle managers has been cut, the organisational memory is usually transferred into a virtual network of managers turned consultants. Creating inter-connected pools of international managers and project leaders is one way of bringing that crucial global knowledge and learning back within the company. Many creative and extensive multi-media methods are being set up to spread that learning systemically through the organisation. Increasing numbers of companies have knowledge managers*.

Much pro-active work needs to be done to prevent internal rivalry, and protecting one's own turf from re-emerging. More attention needs to be paid to the balance between the task and process and profit and people. Management thinking tends to swing back and forth between the two with each swing heralded as a 'new' approach by the management gurus. Top transnational writers¹ have recently stressed the need to go from strategy, systems and staffing to purpose, processes and people and there is now a swing towards the power of the individual rather than whole teams. Whatever the swings and however many wheels are re-invented on the management merry-go-round, managing the interactive processes is now recognised as equally important to the long-term stability and excellent growth of the company as achieving highly effective products and outcomes by co-ordinating and using knowledge and expertise well. So what of the future?

'Globalisation' is Just Warming Up

We have defined globalisation simply as 'economic interdependence between nations'. Some argue that there was more international trade decades ago than now. What is visible now are the large multinationals that function in many countries simultaneously and the growing conformity around key branded products. Given the spate of mergers, strategic alliances and joint ventures, there is clearly an ongoing pressure to become yet bigger and to command adequate market share in more and more national and regional markets.

Large companies will invest heavily in technology and human resources to transform their companies into focused global operations, made up increasingly of international project teams. Small companies and innovative networks will find niche markets between the cracks of the big companies and be able to exploit them with entrepreneurial arrangements based on trust and mutual benefit. As Hermann Simon suggests, small companies can usefully aim high, establish a psychological lead, go deeply into a niche, innovate through slow

* See www.brint.com.

incremental stages and deal directly with customers anywhere in the world². Other companies will remain regional, extending themselves through strategic alliances and joint ventures. In other words, whatever the extent of 'overseas' sales decades ago, true economic interdependence between nations and the spread to mega 'global' companies and alliances has just been warming up these last ten to twenty years.

With regard to management science, so far, much of it has originated in America. It is spreading and other parts of the world digest it at great speed and in huge quantities, especially the Japanese and South East Asians. The fact is that with the shrinking of the global market, Western management will continue to watch and learn from the East just as much as the East will continue to watch and learn from the West. Ford will continue to learn the benefits of a certain amount of centralisation, just as Honda will continue to learn the benefits of being responsive to certain local preferences. Suitable hybrids such as Acer in Taiwan and Toyota in America will continue to emerge. China, India, Russia, Africa and Latin America have so far not had much say in the international management field and that, rightly or wrongly, is unlikely to change much in the immediate future. They will be expected to integrate as best they can, into the current international global business world where a certain set of products and business practices will continue to spread. The split between those that are affected by American, Japanese and hybrid forms of management will, we believe, increasingly be *within* countries, not so much between countries.

Although companies pay consultants like Tom Peters a lot of money to make them aware that they live in turbulent, chaotic times and going a little crazy would be profitable, organisations seem naturally conservative and we therefore doubt we will see any really fundamental change in the purpose or leadership of global companies. By fundamental change, we mean that we have not heard, for instance, of any management guru suggesting that a company scrap the position of CEO or create a top self-managed team with rotating functional leadership from different levels of the company. In fact, current debate is how to have smooth succession into this often controversially highly paid top job. At the moment, the most admired companies tend to have the most visible individual leaders.

Aside from a few admirable attempts at something different like Ben and Jerry's, distinct vertical differentiation of power and wealth within a company are remaining the norm, even if there are fewer, broader layers in the middle. This vertical differentiation also seems to be the most accepted pattern for distributing wealth in an increasingly global capitalist society. This will continue to have some difficult social repercussions in many parts of the world where the gap between rich and poor is getting wider.

Looked at pragmatically, trouble will brew in countries where there are significantly more poor than rich, or lots of people keen to get rich quick. Already the managers of large businesses in these areas, be it in Africa, Latin

America, Indonesia or parts of America, live behind high walls, managed gates and electric fences, with dogs and radio alarm back up and nowhere to safely go for an ordinary thing like a walk. The more dangerous and unstable these areas become, the more difficult it is to do good business.

Alongside this reality come calls for 'equal power' in international teams and leaders becoming coaches, stewards and mentors. We believe that many consultants will keep banging the meritocratic, 'involve different people equally' drum. As some people from developed and 'developing' countries gain the 'right' education and values, they will be accepted into the elite profiting from globalisation. Perhaps two of the most salutary research findings described in this book are that 'the greater the number of nationalities in a team, the less people wanted to work together again', and that the more team members 'cared about each other as people' the more that increased their ratings of their overall performance. We tend to prefer working with and to care more about 'people like us'. 'Like me' will increasingly be 'having the same material wealth, education and access to global information as me' with nationality becoming less important.

Once inside this elite with international access, all the best of what is now being suggested may well be happening; communities based on trust, highly diverse yet all being respected. People will be rewarded for the financial and human value they add to the company and be treated 'equally' with lots of say in what they do each day. Outside these companies, the reality may well look very different. Many companies will feel mostly helpless or uninterested to change the different social, political and economic environments in which they work. For those serious about moving into new markets, they will increasingly look beyond current lack of experience and opportunity and replace the use of expatriate managers with well-trained local people working in dispersed international teams. In order to prevent the kind of negative stereotypes described in Chapter Three arising, companies need to stop rating the world through the lenses of economic strength and technical wizardry and see that each area has its own issues to solve.

Ways of Looking at the Future

As Figure 11.1 points out, it is probably far harder to bring the butterflies back to New York than for a manager in Kenya to get connected onto a desktop video system. Even so the world is almost always measured according to technological development. From that viewpoint, some countries such as America are 'developed' and others, such as Kenya are 'underdeveloped' or 'developing'. From this perspective, at this point in the book we would need to wow the reader with exotic visions of cyberspace, one ahead of the technology that is already pouring out of the likes of Silicon valley. We would then need to extrapolate how it will affect the way people will work in future. This, in our

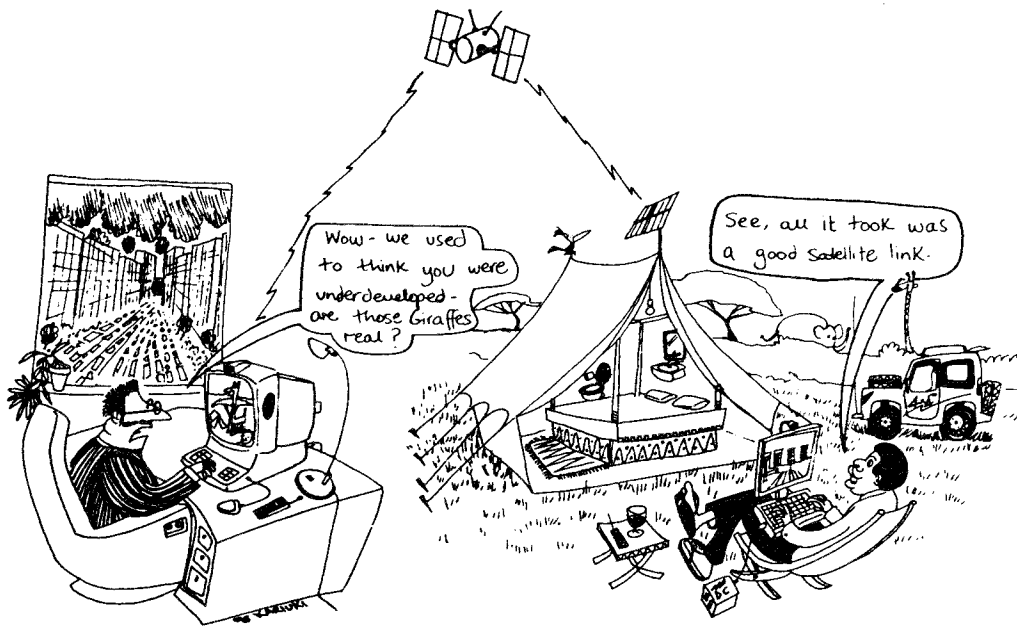


Figure 11.1: Progress?

humble opinion, would be a limited view, even if it is the one that excites many managers.

Aside from technology and natural environment there is another important futuristic view that says that improving the quality and skill of human interaction is the basis for a secure and happy future. Human interaction and social systems need improving everywhere. America persists in thinking that bombing Iraq is a viable option, the Irish and Israeli peace talks rumble on, the Hutus need to learn to live peacefully with Tutsis and vice versa, the heads of Turkish and Greek Cyprus went to school together but now find it politically more expedient to spend millions of dollars pointing missiles at each other, and a massive bomb just ripped through Nairobi, killing over two hundred innocent people and injuring over four thousand.

The annals of history and endless science fiction movies tell us over and over again that many of us still believe that the only way to deal with the bad guys is to kill or zap them. All that has changed over the years is more advanced technology to do it. Despite centuries of opportunity, our ability to settle our differences through negotiation and other social mechanisms has not improved much. Now suppose that by implementing best practices international teams would not be influenced or adversely affected by inequalities or preconceived stereotypes. We believe that this would be a small but profound revolution in people's sense of self worth and the freedom and opportunity to be who they want to be and to appreciate others. Perhaps an even more profound revolution

than being able to interact from any place at any time through a fully equipped virtual meeting facility.

If countries are looked at through at least these three lenses; the quality of human interaction, the quality of the natural environment and the level of technology, then the loaded perceptions that some are much further advanced than others are less clear. It becomes easier to acknowledge that each area has different sets of problems that they need to tackle in order to make life rewarding, safe and full of personal choice for as many people as possible. Some fundamental shifts are in order.

The Future for International Teams

International teams are here to stay. In fact they are only warming up and will be coming in many shapes and sizes. Companies can be assured of a critical mass of research and expertise emerging in the next ten years. This will hopefully do much to clarify which factors are most relevant to team performance. So far, we are convinced that in most cases, what happens in these teams is more sensitive to organisational context and different types of inequalities than to cultural differences per se.

International teams will continue to need to work pro-actively until the 'international team basics', outlined in Chapter Four, become automatic reflexes within and between organisations. New and useful models will emerge. Interventions, cross-cultural translation, international facilitation and interactive individual and team learning spaces will go on-line and be readily available. Hopefully, international teams will not become homogenised and complacent, but will dig ever deeper into the creative depths of their differences.

What technology will offer

Given the amount of ingenuity, money and energy being invested, the technological and subsequent information revolution will continue unabated at a faster and faster pace. Technology will allow certain countries to miss out whole steps that other countries had to go through.

One presumes that from the human interaction perspective, technology is being designed to fulfil the overriding desire to participate from anywhere anytime without being tied to being in a certain place at a certain time. The increasing and rapid development in these wireless 'anytime, anyplace' technologies will make commuting and heading into crowded offices increasingly redundant.

It will do this by:

- Shifting the power increasingly to the user by allowing selective pulling down of information from vast knowledge databases, as and when needed.

There will be much less need to push information from one person to another.

- Increasing the ease and hopefully, emotional fullness of complete interaction at a distance, either one on one or in large or small team meetings.
- Taking over routine processes such as certain standard information flows, arranging meetings, scheduling etc.
- Helping teams to plan, update and keep track of their progress on the task, passing on information from one team member to another as needed, reminding the relevant team member of deadlines, searching out relevant solutions etc.
- Creating on-line interactive exercises and discussions to establish the purpose, goals, roles, ground rules, sources of unity and difference with the team. Interactive team reviews will be available, as will imaginative team process templates to guide the team through fast start up processes.
- Providing interactive on-line cross-cultural facilitation, translation, coaching and problem solving on technical, infrastructure, hardware, software and team process issues.
- Providing new ways to track, evaluate and 'price' knowledge outcomes based on individual contribution.

The result will be that teams will increasingly work solely in the 'team information space' that team members set up in cyberspace and access through their videos, voice respondent gadgets and flexible computers. The biggest threats to competent work will be power cuts, computer viruses and network overloads. Technology will be developed to respond to these threats.

For the individual team members, these facilities will allow greater autonomy about what work they do and when. One may be able to work smart by writing in a number of responses to the outcome of a decision being made elsewhere in the team. When the decision arrives at your workstation, the computer reads it and the appropriate prescribed answer for that outcome is sent off while you are climbing Mount Fuji. So hopefully, based on increasing demand, technology will assist people in not having to be on line 24 hours day and night, while still being able to participate from any place any time.

With regard to interpreting messages, as Chapter Six points out, although the information revolution allows for greater spread and ease of communication, current information technology also allows for greater miscommunication. An important role of good expatriates was to act as on-site cultural buffers and mediators. Now many companies bring locals to the headquarters and send them back to mediate, sometimes with just as disastrous results as with some parent company expatriates, such as when Hong Kong Chinese are expected to know about mainland Chinese practices. Nevertheless, excellent 'dispersed' communication practices will be needed to replace face-to-face on-site mediation.

The revolution in information technology is also becoming a revolution between generations. Young people will grow up 'chatting' with people from

different countries and cultures in their own bedrooms, no doubt sharing their commonalities more than their differences. For many large organisations, teams that never meet will be created from lower levels that are already quite at home on-line. There will be increasing pressure from the bottom up for each level to teach the next level up how to do what they want to do without travelling. Members of the top team are still likely to travel independently, meeting face to face with large groups of workers. They will broadcast and emphasise the overall purpose, philosophy and guiding principles of the company. There will be increasing pressure to also spend much of their time responding to e-mails and joining in on-line discussions.

The managers underneath this may well still travel to meet each other one on one, or in complex decision making task forces that make major strategic changes. Given the freedom and support, they will be the sources of growing company knowledge, the movers, experimenters and shakers. They will in turn be organised (or organise the experts; technicians, engineers, accountants etc) into increasingly locally based, but simultaneously virtually connected international teams that can work at a distance. Some may have to meet if the task is groundbreaking, novel and totally new outcomes are being sought. Others will be able to design, gather, collate and work data, integrate systems and create new ones successfully at a distance without ever meeting. They will all be technologically adept.

Technology may come that allows us to see and transmit subtle and tangible emotional messages, to put all our jostling values, opinions and experiences into the information space which then creates a decision that accounts for them all. Who knows? So far each technology has added to and only gradually completely replaced the ones that went before.

As more people get 'connected', there will be many different configurations of teams. Teams with defined membership and definite boundaries and a set task will probably become the exception rather than the rule. All sorts of linkages, co-operative patterns of work will emerge. New and useful typologies³ will be adopted and new forms identified. Although the model in Chapter Four may well soon speak to the exception, the underlying principles and interventions will still be useful as cultural differences and inequalities will still be potentially difficult to benefit from.

Team members will be recruited and rewarded according to their skill base. Many companies as such, will dissolve into networks of short-term contracts. Team members will increasingly be as good as their last performance, and probably invest in technology that will search relevant websites for on-going team work opportunities. There will be a huge scope for learning and re-inventing your skills in a highly competitive market. People in Silicon Valley will say, but this is not the future, it is the present. For farmers in Rwanda, it is as far away as the Milky Way. Technology will only seriously change the way the world works as a whole as it spreads and supports the desire for improved human interaction ... the much needed social revolution.

The Social Revolution

So what of the social revolution in international teams? As mentioned in Chapter Three, there are three main kinds of inequality that can have a negative impact on the performance of an international team. Structural inequality where there are more people from one nationality than from any other. Linguistic inequality, where some people speak the working language as a mother tongue and perceptual inequality, where some people have more power and influence because of their perceived social standing, not necessarily because of their skills and contribution to the team.

While automatic translation may do something for linguistic inequality, technology per se will not change the others. That takes good team processes and a change in attitude and mindset. As mentioned above, both could be part of what would then be seen as a social revolution. One that will come about through the interaction between the realisation that certain behaviours lead to poor performance and instability, the use of best practices and collaborative technology. Certain changes are predictable.

The team basics will be embedded

Firstly, the team basics listed in Chapter One and expanded into international teams in Chapter Four, will become more and more entrenched as they are pushed and taken up by all kinds of organisations. More and more people will know and accept generically what a team needs to do when they start, do the work and finish. This will lead to 'instantaneous teams' with very short start up times with people who have never met before, forming, doing the work and breaking up with greater ease. Increasingly people will become comfortable with going through the same processes at a distance using increasingly sophisticated technology.

Templates for handling differences

In this book we have illustrated the cultural value checklist that we have found very useful. Fons Trompenaars has produced an interactive version of his cultural dimensions that managers can analyse where they stand against many country norms. Another group, Transnational Management Associates, have created a simulation to take people through the live implications of making decisions based on Fons' cultural framework. While we cannot say how, one gets the impression that just as David Sibbett is using his graphic talents to create team process templates, templates for handling cultural differences will go on line, be projected and become increasingly complex as well as good fun. The only caveat would be that in creating a sophisticated tool, managers might not be prepared, in spirit and feeling, for when they encounter the edges of the industrialised world. That said, we look forward to see what develops. A lot

more will probably be usefully said about culturally different patterns of cognition and logic⁴ and the need for greater emotional intelligence⁵ in international teams both which may become common additional aspects of the 'basics'.

The interplay of timing, team processes and parts of the task will become increasingly crucial

Once the team processes and task phases have been understood and embedded, there will be increasing focus on timing and rhythm in teams⁶, especially those processes that can happen synchronistically and lead to major leaps in productivity, paradigm shifts and helpful 'catastrophic' events. For those wishing to dig deeper into the interconnectedness, messiness, complexity and transformative learning potential of these teams, the analogies and 'new' thinking are already available. Systems thinking, chaos theory, complexity theory and alchemy offer themselves as alluring candidates.

Analysing teams using systems thinking will show the interdependence of the organisational, team and individual levels and perhaps be the most useful model to assist in connecting the work of and events in a team to the organisation as a whole. One of the features of systems thinking is to explain unforeseen blockages created by good intentions or seemingly harmless actions. This may turn out to be very helpful in getting senior managers to understand the consequences of their seemingly harmless actions and attitudes. It may also be useful in demonstrating to teams at all levels of the company that by doing it right, they too can have an impact on the whole... create a 'far from equilibrium' change.

Chaos and catastrophe theory are alluring because they help to move us away from the linear models that have dominated team thinking to perhaps give us a description of those strategic moments, where something just clicks in a team. It can help us think about fields of creativity held in reasonable coherence by special attractors, which may be the ground rules or common sources of cohesion. They may inspire some teams to let go of too rigid procedures by realising that seemingly chaotic patterns of interaction and approaches can be underscored by patterns of order at other levels. The task is to identify the underlying patterns to see if they are leading the team where it needs to go. Reflecting back on the team called Bank 2 in Chapter Three, their response to their chaotic friendly interaction was to impose rigid order, which drained all the energy in the teams. They needed to look deeper to other sources of order that would have allowed free interaction but that guided it in a more useful way.

New scientific thinking has also emphasised the importance of each team member being able to know and understand themselves in relation to others⁷. Maintaining one's core identity, while forging creative ways of co-ordinating one's activities with others is a key aspect of high performing international

teams. However, the analogies of chaos theory will probably remain more as juicy analogies and descriptions of possible underlying principles. They will serve to shift the focus onto accepting/inviting non-linear processes, but are unlikely to act as predictors of what will happen in any one international team. A phone call to Mandelbrot⁸ some years ago about the possibility of explaining the interaction of international teams with chaos theory, elicited the response, 'I am humble, I stick to fractals'.

Complexity theory helps us understand that coherent complex systems can emerge from a few simple central principles. We are suggesting that practising what you preach throughout the organisation, actively creating level playing fields from inherent inequality, and agreeing clear ground rules for interaction are three of the key principles essential to allow international teams to become creative and involved in highly complex processes. It is a useful perspective and further in-depth exploration will say much about the rhythms and timing that create complexity from simplicity.

For those more drawn to allegorical thinking, alchemy is alluring because the processes that lead to transformation in a sealed crucible are multidirectional and complex. It recognises that processes that are seemingly negative can be a necessary part of transformation. Preparation, descent, grounding, putrefaction, coagulation, mortification (wounding), awakening, nourishment, extension, multiplication, union, rippling, encircling, all lead up to transformation. A transformation happens out of time, where what has gone before ceases to exist. When a critical mass of best practice and understanding has been reached, something seems to happen in many teams, some kind of coalescence. Team members may not be able to fully describe what has changed, only that things work much better and old personality and emotional problems don't bother them anymore.

In future, all these four disciplines may provide creative and thought-provoking different angles on what happens in international teams and change the way some people think about them. As process templates and certain ways of starting teams become embedded, these may be helpful in shaking up things that have then become too rigid again. They will help teams to break out of set norms and to look afresh at different ways of working. Once the team basics have become second nature to most team members, these more complex and intricate processes may become the subject of exploration and study and reveal interesting and sometimes quirky insights.

We are sure that if the value and richness of cultural variety is to be harvested and enjoyed, we need to passionately love our differences and protect them from overriding norms. Structured processes and best practices are invaluable in preventing dominance or unnecessary homogenisation. We remind the reader of our initial analogy of weaving. That international teams may weave a brown cloth, but closer inspection reveals that the individual threads are bright yellow, red, blue, green, pink and so on, not a uniform brown. Such threads can be unravelled and re-woven into many different patterns, whereas uniform brown

