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Cultural Context Matters: An Examination of Remote Team Leaders from Brazil and the United States

Remote work has increased globally after the COVID-19 outbreak. Leaders adapted to assist virtual teams in overcoming distance, communication, and technological issues. The new work environment is the new normal. Studies reveal that over 50% of Brazil and the United States (US) virtual employees wish to work remotely after the pandemic (Salesforce, 2020).

Teams working remotely pose several challenges to leadership. For example, the distance between the team members and their leader compromises social interaction (Ford et al., 2017), which harms teams' trust, cohesion, synergy, and coordination (Alfehaid & Mohamad, 2019; Ford et al., 2017; Fried & Hansson, 2013). Even though several studies show the challenges and practices to overcome them in virtual teams, more literature is needed to compare the approaches of leaders of virtual teams from different countries.

Meyer (2015) states that individuals from various cultures lead, communicate, interact, make decisions, and plan meetings differently. This study illustrates how Brazilian and American leaders see virtual team challenges differently and use various methods to improve team members' contentment and performance. This research examines virtual team leaders' traits, problems, and best practices in Brazil and the US.

The study employed three specific research questions: (1) What are the characteristics and challenges faced by Brazilian and American virtual team leaders? (2) Are those challenges similar or different? (3) Are those best practices similar or different? These research questions aim to compare the similarities and differences between American and Brazilian virtual team leaders.

Literature Review

COVID-19 Impact on Remote Work

The 2020 effect of COVID-19 on the US and Brazil is crucial to understanding the parallels and contrasts in virtual leadership difficulties between the two nations. Table 1 contrasts Latin America & the Caribbean versus the US & Canada (Gallup, 2021). The poll reveals disparities. 33% of US & Canadian

participants lost wages, compared to 57% in Latin America & Caribbean. Latin America & Caribbean lost 31% of businesses, while the US and Canada lost 13%. These percentages show the influence of industrialized and developing nations.

Table 1

Covid-19 Impact Comparison

| Indicator | Latin America & Caribbean | United States & Canada |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Life Impact | 45% | 50% |
| Lost Pay | 57% | 33% |
| Temporarily Stopped Work | 58% | 38% |
| Employee Engagement | 24% | 34% |
| Lost a Job or Business | 31% | 13% |
| Life Evaluation | 39% | 56% |

Source. Gallup, 2021.

Virtual Leadership Challenges

An article from the Harvard Business Review has identified four key challenges that global virtual team (GVT) leaders face: (a) team composition, (b) isolation, (c) technology, and (d) communication (2010).

Team composition describes picking the right members for the virtual team. Team members who joined the group before virtual work may behave differently (Harvard Business Review, 2010). In such cases, the leader must fortify team members and provide them with the virtual tools they need to succeed. Also, workers moving to remote work want their leaders to educate them in virtual work skills (Salesforce, 2020). Therefore, team composition should consider selecting people, roles, teams, organizations, and development (Gallup, 2020).

Isolation pertains to virtual teams. It is an essential concept because it describes the loneliness and disconnectedness resulting from the lack of face-to-face interaction commonly found in in-person settings (Harvard Business Review, 2010). Sometimes, members of virtual work communities learn to bond over new experiences like virtual meetings or learning more about the personal lives of colleagues through remote work (Gallup, 2020). Experiences like this can help to mitigate challenges around isolation and

loneliness in virtual teams.

Technology, when leveraged well, can lift barriers to common virtual team challenges such as communication, coordination, and collaboration (Harvard Business Review, 2010). Of all the participants, 70% from a Salesforce survey on the future of work agreed that technology needs to be a big part of workforce development (Salesforce, 2020).

Communication can be challenging due to the geographical dispersion of team members and can be a leading cause of project failure if it needs to be improved (Haron et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020). Establishing communication norms for the virtual team is imperative (Harvard Business Review, 2010). Virtual teams can increase productivity if leaders can improve communication by leveraging communication technology (Newman et al., 2020).

Unique Challenges to Brazil

A study conducted in Brazil found a need for increased education and technological infrastructure to support virtual leadership and communication (Wilthorn & Wikstrom, 2014). Brazil lost connectivity, non-verbal communication, informality, and tacit knowledge exchange as remote work began during the COVID-19 pandemic (Waight et al., 2022). Workplace inequality and family time rose. Furthermore, Brazilian workers spend more time preparing meetings and managing communications after becoming virtual.

Garcia (2021) explains that employees who wanted to move from the big cities of Brazil to smaller towns faced minor or non-existent internet connectivity. Fully remote workers may also experience unreliable electricity (Martins et al., 2021). For example, in São Paulo, a few small cities could increase internet speed via fiber optic internet, but these improvements were not widespread. Many other small cities had extremely slow connectivity, if they had any at all (Garcia, 2021), posing a unique challenge for GVT leaders with team members in Brazil. The leader must navigate remote employees' internet and connectivity needs and create a plan to mitigate these issues.

Remote workers who must intermittently commute to the workplace face challenges due to the need for transportation from some small cities to metropolitan areas (Garcia, 2021). Often, citizens in

metropolitan cities do not need to have cars; however, living in a small town where it is necessary to commute to the office every so often requires an investment in transportation (Garcia, 2021).

Methodological Approach

The authors employed a qualitative research technique using structured interviews for this study to provide a phenomenological description of virtual team leadership practices. The subject unit of this study was Brazilian and American leaders of virtual teams with a minimum of five years of experience in any leadership position. The participants are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographics of Virtual Team Leaders Interviewed

| Interviewee | Gender | Team size Small < 5 Medium 5 < 15 Large > 15 | National Origin |
|-------------|--------|---|-----------------|
| 1 | Male | Medium | United States |
| 2 | Male | Medium | United States |
| 3 | Female | Medium | United States |
| 4 | Female | Medium | United States |
| 5 | Female | Medium | United States |
| 6 | Male | Medium | United States |
| 7 | Male | Medium | United States |
| 8 | Female | Medium | Brazil |
| 9 | Female | Large | Brazil |
| 10 | Male | Large | Brazil |
| 11 | Male | Medium | Brazil |
| 12 | Male | Medium | Brazil |
| 13 | Male | Large | Brazil |
| 14 | Female | Small | Brazil |

Note. This table summarizes the participants interviewed in this study, including their gender, team size, and country of origin.

Interviewee selection occurred through professional public social media, LinkedIn, and interviews were conducted online according to IRB protocol #21-01-1514. The interviews were structured into 12 open-ended questions, which went through a process of internal validity using prima facie and peer review among the three researchers. The interviews took place virtually from March to May 2021, using the Zoom

application. All interviews were audio-recorded only. Once the interviews were concluded, the results were transcribed and de-identified to guarantee confidentiality, and the files were prepared for coding.

This research authors have already worked in virtual settings as employees and leading teams remotely. Therefore, they recognized that their extensive experience in the field may influence the data interpretation. To mitigate any biases, the authors bracketed their experiences and used an internal peer review process for coding.

Data Analysis & Discussion

Data Analysis

In this study, the authors coded using Creswell & Creswell's (2020) eight steps for coding. To guarantee the reliability of the coding process, one researcher coded the interviews, and the other two peer-reviewed the codes until reaching a consensus. After establishing the codes, the researchers grouped them into themes. The researchers used hybrid coding. They had codes and themes from the literature but also allowed new codes to emerge from the lived experience. The themes were analyzed per interview question and then grouped into the research questions.

Discussion of the Findings

The study's findings reveal organizational leaders' experience levels. Leadership experience helps establish teams, particularly when resolving workplace problems. 57% of survey participants had substantial experience. When unexpected circumstances disrupt work, experienced leaders provide a clear path. During the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced leaders guided people and made reasonable choices to preserve company continuity. Lack of experience might impact on how the company handles a disturbance.

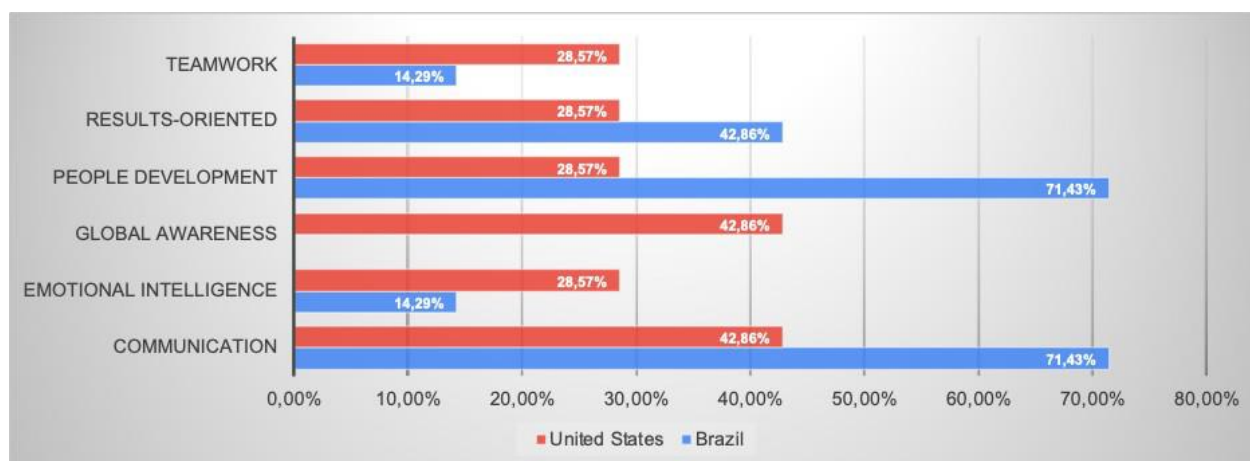
Characteristics of Virtual Teams Leaders.

When asked about the most critical characteristics necessary to lead a virtual team, the interviewees highlighted six main themes illustrated in Figure 1: (a) teamwork, which is the ability to build a team and increase its cohesion, (b) result-oriented relates to the ability to create and deliver value to the organization, (c) people development is the ability to recognize individuals needs and support their

professional development and growth, (d) global awareness refers to the ability to work with people from different countries, (e) emotional intelligence relates to leaders self and social awareness and the ability to deal with uncertainties, and (f) communication relates to conveying the message, goals and keep the team members informed.

Figure 1

Characteristics of Virtual Team Leaders by Country



Note. This figure displays the most frequent themes representing the best practices of virtual team leaders. The red bars represent the American leader's responses, and the blue ones represent the Brazilian leader's responses.

Both countries' leaders have a similar perception of the characteristics necessary to leading teams virtually. For example, interviewees from both countries cited 5 out of 6 themes. However, there are differences in the frequency and nuances of the characteristics they mentioned. The most frequent characteristics among Brazilian leaders were people development and communication. American leaders' most frequent characteristics are communication and global awareness.

Communication is a crucial leadership ability since it influences others toward a shared vision (Northouse, 2019). Brazilians and Americans communicate differently. One explanation for this difference is the cultural communication scale, which shows that the US is a lower-context country than Brazil (Meyer, 2015). Americans utilize communication to set clear objectives. Brazilians communicate aims, viewpoints, and employee issues. Relational societies like Brazil also prioritize non-verbal communication (Waight et al., 2022). It may explain why Brazilians often mention people development, which involves

granting workers autonomy and making them accountable for their results.

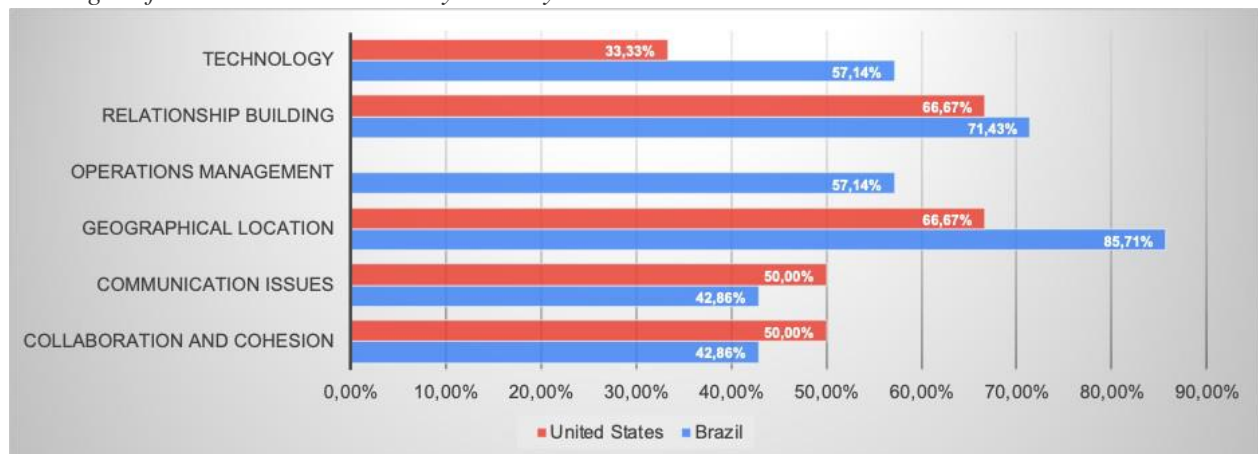
Only Americans cited global awareness as an essential trait of virtual leaders. Regional distinctions, notably time zones, were stressed by these leaders. There are six different time zones in the United States, and the time varies up to five hours. Some leaders collaborate with European global team members, increasing the time difference to nine hours. Brazil has four time zones with a three-hour difference. Most firms operate in the official Brazilian time zone and the Amazon time zone, which varies by one hour. Fried and Hansson (2013) illustrate that activity coordination is more complex when team members operate with a four-hour time difference, which is what happens in the US.

Challenges of Virtual Team Leaders

Regarding the main challenges in leading virtual teams, the interviewees' responses were summarized in six themes illustrated in Figure 2. They are (a) technology, which relates to the challenges of usage, comfort, and fatigue with virtual platforms, (b) relationship building includes challenges leaders face to build personal relations, trust, and motivate people, (c) operations management, includes challenges regarding team task organization, resource allocation, and scheduling of meetings or essential activities, (d) geographical location relates to elements of the virtual teams such as time zones, culture, and language (e) communication issues, and (f) collaboration and cohesion among dispersing team members.

Figure 2

Challenges of Virtual Team Leaders by Country



Note. This figure displays the most frequent themes representing the challenges of a virtual team. The red bars represent the American leader's responses, and the blue ones represent the Brazilian leader's responses.

The frequency of issues relating to relationship building, communication, and collaboration is similar between Americans and Brazilians. However, issues relating to technology, operations management, and geographical locations are cited more frequently among Brazilians.

Technology is an issue supported by recent literature on virtual work in Brazil (Waight et al., 2022; Wilthorn & Wikstrom, 2014). Additionally, one of those studies mentioned that during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees migrated to countryside areas, contributing to this factor. The combination of the pandemic and the previously cited problems with technological infrastructure might have contributed to the higher frequency of this issue among Brazilians.

Operational management was a challenge cited by most Brazilians, 57%, and none of Americans. The current literature about virtual leadership needs to cover this type of challenge. Therefore, the authors of this study believe it is a new contribution to the field.

Finally, 85% of Brazilians and 66% of Americans say geographic location is a problem, indicating that both nations face this issue. However, the two leaders' regional characteristics may differ because Brazilians are more relational than Americans (Meyer, 2015). Time zones, language, and leaders' inability to engage with workers and interpret the environment are issues for Brazilians. In contrast, the interaction is different for Americans. Americans consider clear, timely, and direct communication essential and more valuable than physical or environmental interaction (Meyer, 2015). Geographic dispersion increases the difficulty of this communication approach (Haron et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020). Brazilians feel more the loss of context and actual connection, whereas Americans feel the virtual team communication failure more.

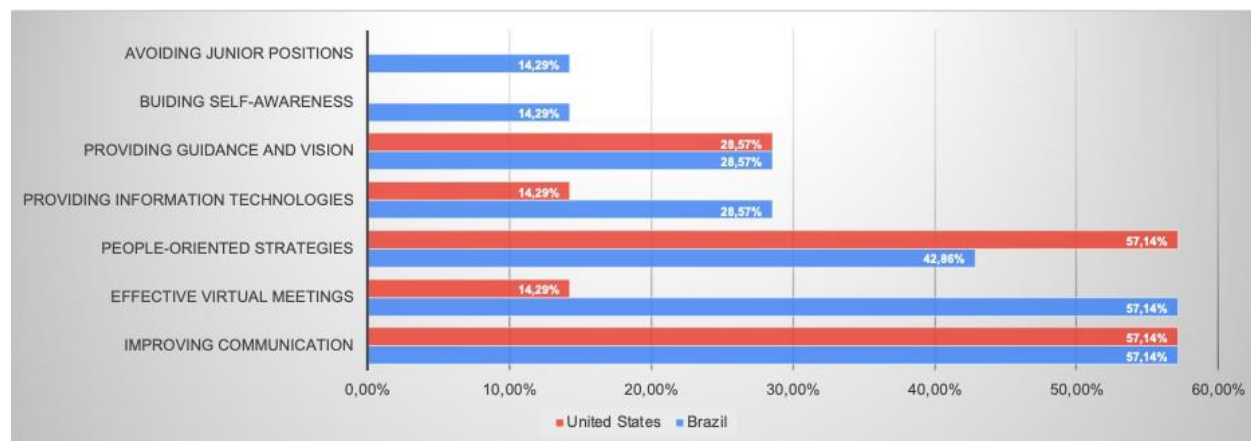
Virtual Team Leader's Responses to Challenges

The researchers also asked the two groups of leaders to identify strategies and best practices they used to overcome the challenges of leading virtual teams. Figure 3 illustrates those responses: (a) avoiding junior positions such as trainees to work virtually, (b) building self-awareness, (c) providing guidance and vision to all team members, (d) providing technologies and information to the employees, (e) applying

people-oriented strategies which include training, delegation, and giving people opportunities, (f) establishing effective virtual meetings, and (g) improving communication with team members.

Figure 3

How Leaders Overcome Challenges in Each Country



Note. This figure displays the most frequent themes representing the strategies to overcome challenges. The red bars represent the American leader's responses, and the blue ones represent the Brazilian leader's responses.

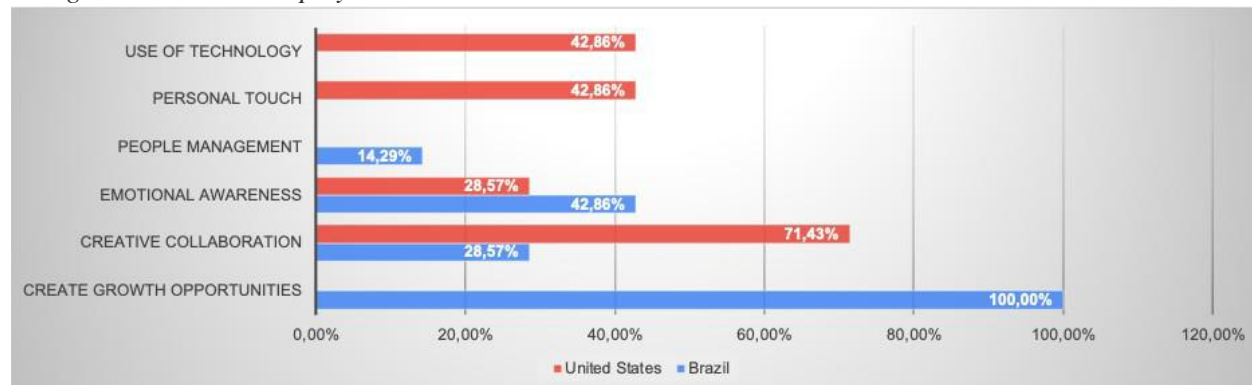
Brazilians and Americans claiming to use strategies for improving communication or providing guidance and vision are the same. Brazilians tend to use technology and virtual meeting organization strategies more frequently. This strategy choice resonates with the fact that these Brazilian leaders have more challenges concerning technology than the Americas, as previously stated in Figure 2. Additionally, several Brazilian leaders showed dissatisfaction with extensive virtual meetings without context and visual contact. Another strategy unique to Brazilian leaders is avoiding hiring employees in junior positions, such as trainees, to work remotely. That is because remote work requires a certain level of maturity that they did not find in junior employees.

Motivation is a vital piece of team members' performance. More motivated team members present a better rapport between followers and leaders, putting them on the right path toward the goals and vision (Lauring & Jonasson, 2018). Figure 4 demonstrates the strategies those leaders use to motivate employees: (a) Use of technology, such as applications and platforms to interact with employees, (b) personal touch, such as individual characteristics or traits, (c) people management strategies, which include training,

delegation, and developmental strategies, (d) emotional awareness, which includes empathy, self, and social awareness, and preventing burnouts, (e) creative collaboration includes innovative ways to engage with people virtually such as virtual events and icebreakers, and (f) create growth opportunities, which include mentoring and actions focused around specific individuals.

Figure 4

Strategies to Motivate Employees



Note. This figure displays the most frequent themes representing the strategies to motivate virtual teams. The red bars represent the American leader's responses, and the blue ones represent the Brazilian leader's responses.

As illustrated in Figure 4, Americans focus on using technological resources, creative collaboration online, and their approach. In contrast, Brazilians focus on creating opportunities for their employees to grow and emotional awareness. This difference resonates with the differences between low and high-context cultures, as explained by Meyer (2015). Americans are lower-context and focus on straightforward tasks. Brazilians are contextual and relational. Therefore, they focus on understanding and adapting their approach to each individual.

Conclusions and Contributions

In leading virtual teams, a leader's experience plays a vital role in the team's motivation and performance. US and Brazilian leaders face similar challenges and often apply similar strategies to overcome these challenges. However, this study points out challenges and responses that are country-specific. Cultural differences can explain differences between relational and higher-context countries, such as Brazil, versus low-context countries, such as the US (Meyer, 2015). Another portion of the differences

is related to the technological infrastructure, which imposes more challenges on developing countries like Brazil.

Data demonstrates that US and Brazilian virtual leaders vary in their approaches. Brazilian respondents discussed operations management, avoiding junior remote roles, and self-awareness. Only Americans cited global awareness, technology, and personal touch to encourage workers. Leaders and team members must recognize differences like these to prepare for and anticipate issues. C-suite executives in multinational firms need this information to choose managers and directors. This study is unique because no research has examined virtual leadership methods in the US and Brazil.

Limitations of the Study

This study also presents some limitations. First, it was conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when some leaders and employees were still learning to work remotely. Additionally, several technologies were still being developed and tested. This study does not measure or separate the possible effects of individual learning curves and new technologies, which could be a topic for future studies.

Lastly, this study focused on virtual team leaders in Brazil and the US. It does not separate the characteristics, challenges, and strategies exclusive from minority groups. However, this study's authors recognize that there might be differences when analyzing how minority groups lead virtual teams, which can be understood with studies envisioning narrowed populations.

Future Studies

One recommended future research topic is industry-specific leadership best practices. A second one might examine the methods and habits of individuals based on gender. Finally, future research might isolate answers from one nation to better understand regional patterns and difficulties. Since many employees choose remote work, virtual leadership research is crucial (Salesforce, 2020).

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