

# Predicting Group Faultlines in Multinational Crisis Response Teams

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## ABSTRACT

Education in crisis response traditionally includes formal field exercises that attempt to replicate to some extent the chaos and complexity of an emergency situation. Part of the complexity facing multinational teams of crisis response professionals is diversity within the team itself. In this paper we discuss the group faultline model of diversity and its impact on team performance. Faultlines exist wherever there is diversity. When faultlines become active - and only when they become active - they form barriers to team cohesion and impediments to team performance. We propose that it is eminently feasible to develop a toolkit that managers of multinational crisis response teams can use to identify and span group faultlines. We identify two classes of tools. The first is a questionnaire that elicits information that can be used to (1) infer faultline length and to predict the relative likelihood of activation, and (2) identify (individual) team members who can span a ruptured faultline and facilitate team cohesion. The identification suggests appropriate actions that the instructor can take to help the team bridge the rift. The second tool in the kit is a checklist of defensive routines - policies and actions that attempt to save face - that can be used to identify faultline rupture. We are currently working at developing the tools in this toolkit.

## Keywords

Group faultlines, cultural diversity, defensive routines, toolkit, training exercises.

## INTRODUCTION

The premise of our argument is that team cohesion is a good idea: a team that splits into conflicting subgroups cannot be expected to perform well. Forces that threaten team cohesion need to be identified and dealt with swiftly by those in a position to do so.

We propose that it is both feasible and desirable to provide instructors and managers of training exercises in crisis response with tools that they can apply to predict whether, where, and why cultural as well as demographic diversity is likely to split a multinational team into culturally homogeneous subgroups. The tools distill knowledge about team cohesion, cultural norms, team work, boundary spanning, and leadership skills in a format that provides the information that instructors and managers need to identify faultlines before they form and as they are rupturing and to implement quick and strategic fixes.

Threats to team cohesion are particularly strong when teams are formed ad-hoc and when they first meet. The primary threats to team cohesion that we discuss are demographic and cultural diversity. Diversity need not be divisive but it often is. It has the potential to split a multinational group into culturally homogenous and conflicting/separate subgroups. As responders to large natural disasters invariably come from many nations and cultures, managers of multinational crisis response teams need to be on the alert for culturally-driven breakdowns in team cohesion. The challenge to instructors is to overcome divisive differences so that the team's diversity can be used beneficially. People from different cultures often have complementary perspectives that can form synergies that enhance team performance.

Many crisis responders first encounter responders from other cultures during multinational training exercises. The instructors and managers of training exercises need to be able to understand and predict whether diversity may

**Reviewing Statement:** This paper has been fully double blind peer reviewed.

hinder team performance in multinational teams.

This paper has four parts. The first discusses *group faultlines*, the metaphor that forms the theoretic foundation for the claim that it is feasible for instructors to predict the relative level of threat to team cohesion posed by the team's cultural and demographic diversity if they are given appropriate tools. We argue that the likelihood of breakdowns in team cohesion increases with the length of a group faultline. In the second part, we review a case study of the training exercise that provided the inspiration for this paper and the toolkit we propose. The review highlights the basis for predicting the presence of group faultlines and the behaviors that revealed that faultlines had split the team into culturally homogeneous subgroups. The third part identifies these behaviors as instances of *defensive routines*, policies and actions that attempt to save face. We suggest that instructors and managers can make predictions concerning the potential team cohesion by using tools that reveal the alignment of demographic and cultural characteristics across team members and by being on the lookout for defensive routines. Further, we propose that awareness of alignments can also be used to identify individuals with the potential to bridge faultlines and to mediate the interaction of potentially divisive subgroups.

## TEAM DIVERSITY AND GROUP FAULTLINES

*Team diversity* refers to the degree to which members of a team differ along dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, profession and educational background (Milliken, Bartel & Kurtzberg, 2003). These visually or contextually self-evident categorizations are generally assumed to provide the foundation on which team members interact and cooperate when they first meet (Byrne, 1971; Lau & Murnighan, 1998). Research on the influence of diversity on team performance has not produced consistent results (Early & Mosakowski, 2000; Thatcher, Jehn & Zanutto, 2003). Many studies show that diversity in work groups leads to increased conflict and poorer performance; many others show that diversity leads to decreased conflict and improved performance. Thatcher, Jehn and Zanutto argue that the reason for this inconsistency is that most studies have considered only one demographic characteristic to the exclusion of others, e.g., either gender or ethnicity in isolation. There appears to have been little experimental research with groups with multiple dimensions of diversity.

International crisis management provides a natural laboratory for studying highly diverse teams. The diversity extends beyond the basic dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, profession and educational background to (1) core cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (1980) - power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism - (2) beliefs and values (Schwartz, 1992, 1994) and (3) norms for task allocation and communication (K. Smith, Lindgren, and Granlund, in review). The variety of culturally shaped norms is vast and its impact on team performance cannot be captured by considering one dimension at a time. To study the influence of cultural diversity on multinational crisis response teams, we must examine demographic characteristics, beliefs, values, and norms for behavior.

The *group faultline* metaphor (Lau and Murnighan, 1998, 2005) seeks to explain and predict when, where, and why some diverse teams cohere and some do not. Group faultlines are hypothetical dividing lines that may split a group into subgroups based on the simultaneous alignment of several attributes. The metaphor predicts that the likelihood of team cohesion is an inverse function of the ease with which a group can be partitioned along aligned dimensions of diversity.

Table 1 provides an illustration of group faultlines that, for simplicity, relies on demographic dimensions of diversity. Nationality is used as a proxy for culture in this table for practical reasons. As a general rule, people from the same country can be assumed to share a language, a historic period, and a geographic location, and therefore to have a shared foundation on which a culture can emerge and be maintained. Using nationality as a 'definition' of culture is widely recognized to be a convenient solution at best (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz 1992; Smith & Bond, 1999; Smith, et al., 2006) and has been roundly criticized (Duranti, 1997; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

In Table 1, the level of diversity increases from group 1 to group 4. In group 1, diversity is minimal; there is little reason to expect diversity to cause the team to split into subgroups. In group 4, diversity is extreme; group members have only the group as such in common. For both groups 1 and 4, there is no convenient way to partition the group into subgroups. The group faultline metaphor predicts that both groups 1 and 4 will cohere because there is no ready partitioning into subgroups.

Group 2 contains two short faultlines. One separates the two sexes and the other the two ethnicities. All four team members belong to the same age cohort and have the same occupation. These similarities bridge the two short

faultlines. The metaphor predicts that this bridging reduces the likelihood of either of the faultlines becoming active and splitting the group into subgroups. In contrast, the group faultline metaphor predicts that group 3 is likely to split apart. The four members of this group can look at each other and see that they form two pairs, two Swedish male teachers in their fifties and two Iranian female students in their thirties. The strong alignment of these characteristics defines a long cross-cutting faultline. The length of the faultline increases the potential for splitting the team into homogeneous subgroups.

In sum, long faultlines are more likely to rupture than short faultlines and faultline formation is not a function of diversity alone. Long faultlines are formed when teams can readily form homogeneous subgroups. Multinational crisis management teams are highly susceptible to the formation of long faultlines.

Group 1	Student	Student	Student	Student	No diversity
	Man	Man	Man	Man	
	20	20	20	20	No faultline
	Swede	Swede	Swede	Swede	
Group 2	Student	Student	Student	Student	Low diversity
	Man	Man	Woman	Woman	
	20	20	20	20	Two short faultlines
	Pakistani	Swede	Swede	Pakistani	
Group 3	Teacher	Teacher	Student	Student	Moderate diversity
	Man	Man	Woman	Woman	
	50	55	31	35	One long faultline
	Swede	Swede	Iranian	Iranian	
Group 4	Student	Teacher	Nurse	Fireman	High diversity
	Woman	Man	Woman	Man	
	20	65	30	50	Many short faultlines
	Swede	Bosnian	Iranian	Indian	

**Table 1. Illustration of group faultlines and potential subgroup formation**

## CASE STUDY

This section reviews an observation of one of the Swedish Rescue Services Agency's (SRSA) field exercises in crisis response and management. The purpose of the observation was to document the teaching and/or transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge about emergency response and management.

### The exercise

The exercise was designed to train emergency management professionals' skills in operations coordination, urban search and rescue, and humanitarian assessment (Alexander, 2000; Baldwin, 1994). The scenario postulated that an earthquake had decimated the infrastructure of a fictional country. The exercise simulated the first crucial days of response and lasted approximately 60 hours. SRSA actors played the roles of all actors and stakeholders in the response effort.

Three separate teams participated in the exercise. The team we observed was training to establish an onsite operations coordination center (OSOCC). The other teams focused on urban search and rescue and humanitarian assessment. The official languages were English and Russian. Each team had a translator and an instructor with extensive field experience. The observation was documented with semi-structured field notes and digital photographs. All contact with participants was brief, formal and openly classified as observation. Coffee breaks and the like provided opportunities to converse with the instructors.

### The observed team

The eight members of the OSOCC team came from eight different European countries, Table 2. They had different professional backgrounds and spoke different languages. There were six men and two women. A female translator was the de-facto ninth member of the team. Inspection of Table 2 identifies three clusters of characteristics and two relatively long faultlines. The most salient faultline separates the two Russian-speaking women from the six English-speaking men. Because the women spoke only Russian, they had to rely on the female translator to understand conversations held in English. The fact that the translator was a women served to reinforce partitioning into these two subgroups. Profession was the source of three subgroups - Press Officers, Firemen, and other - and two short faultlines. One of those faultlines was lengthened by the alignment of language; the two team members who were not Firemen or Press officers spoke German and worked in allied fields.

ID #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Trans.
Nationality	German	Austrian	Finnish	Lithuanian	Latvian	Romanian	Ukrainian	Russian	Russian/ Swedish
Sex	Man	Man	Man	Man	Man	Man	Woman	Woman	Woman
Languages	German English	German English	Finnish English	Russian English	Russian English	Russian English	Russian	Russian	Russian English
Profession	Military	NGO	Fireman	Fireman	Fireman	Press officer	Press officer	Press officer	Translator
Age	50	30	40	30	40	30	30	40	50

**Table 2. Dimensions of demographic diversity in the OSOCC team**

This analysis of the OSOCC team predicts two faultlines that have the potential to split the team into culturally homogeneous subgroups. The more obvious separates the two women and their translator from the men. The more subtle separates the two German-speaking men. The analysis also identifies the Romanian man as the one member of the group who has the potential to bridge the faultline between the Russian-speaking women and the English-speaking men. Like the women, he speaks Russian and is a Press officer. He is also a man who speaks English. If he acts in a supportive manner, he is in a position to be the interface between the two subgroups. In contrast, there is no one in a similar position to span the faultline separating the two German-speaking men who are not Firemen or Press officers from the rest of the team.

### Day 1

The exercise started in Denmark where the team received two cars, office supplies, cash, technical equipment, and their mission: to reach the afflicted country (Sweden) and set up an OSOCC. The purpose of an OSOCC is to assist local authorities' efforts to coordinate the multitude of international relief agencies, personnel, and media.

At the beginning of the first day, the team chose the older German man, participant 1, to be the team leader. No other team member was assigned a task or responsibility. Their roles were to be assigned when the team reached the (simulated) earthquake zone. The initial mission briefing was marked by confusion. Five members of the team engaged in a lively discussion in English about the route to take to the earthquake zone. The translator did not translate this discussion, isolating the two women from the onset.

After the briefing, the team was to meet with an official from the United Nations (one of the sponsors of the exercise). However, the two women were missing. This displeased the UN official who started the meeting anyway. The two women and the man sent to find them arrived five minutes later. While it is unclear why the women were not in the room, their action identified them as a subgroup of two and increased the tension within the team. One of the two long faultlines was already beginning to open.

The team then drove into Sweden, got stuck in customs (a pre-arranged difficulty), and eventually arrived at the location where they were to establish their OSOCC. The team had yet to assign roles and responsibilities. The two German speaking men immediately started setting up the room, putting up maps, etc. The rest of the team was left

to fend for itself. One by one, the other men got busy. The two women, however, sat aside with the translator who eagerly showed them photos of her grandchildren. The women's shirking of responsibilities is a classic example of a *defensive routine* (Argyris, 1993) - it is an action taken, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid conflict and embarrassment. The first faultline was active.

The hallmark of the morning was the rudderless, ineffective leadership by the German-speaking subgroup. The other long faultline was also beginning to open.

After lunch, the team assembled and assigned roles and responsibilities. Working on their new assignments, they met with actors representing local people and other stakeholders. At approximately 17:00, role confusion became obvious. Some team members were relatively inactive. The two German-speaking men were doing not only their own jobs but also a little of everyone else's too. While they ran around the room and acted stressed, one of the women played a computer game(!). Hyperactivity and displaced activity are both defensive routines that can be signals of a lack of team cohesion.

We interpret the defensive routines as evidence that both long faultlines had activated. By the end of the Day 1, the team had effectively split into three culturally homogeneous subgroups: the two frenetic German speakers, the four men who found their tasks interfered with, and the two uninvolved women. At the end of the day, the instructor encouraged the team to decide on new roles for the next day.

## Day 2

The next morning, new roles had been assigned. Participant 4, the Lithuanian fireman, was the team leader. The reallocation of roles did little to encourage team cohesion. The two German speaking men continued to show stress and frustration. Communication within the team consisted mainly of misunderstanding and raised voices. Participant 1, no longer the team leader, complained about poor handling of information within the team. This task was the responsibility of one of the women. By 10:30, at the morning meeting, the faultlines had fully activated. Internal strife was apparent to all. Many team members were not in the room for the scheduled meeting. Once they were rounded up, several team members, especially the younger woman, openly expressed discontent with how the team was working. This discussion led nowhere. In addition, the translator interjected her own ideas on how the team should work.

At 11:00, the instructor interrupted the meeting and called a 'time out' in the exercise. He gave a short speech about the importance of dividing tasks and then sticking to one's own task. In response, two subgroups formed to discuss their situation, one speaking English and the other Russian. There was no communication between these subgroups for about an hour. When the team leader pulled the team together, a meeting was held in English. The translator translated only sporadically, leaving the two women totally out of the conversation. All three women sat at one end of the table. The men sat and talked at the other. The women were separated from the rest of the team not only by language but also space. The physical gap between the subgroups marked a culturally-driven faultline.

When the OSOCC team went back to work, another team's translator (a Russian speaking woman) asked the instructor if it would be OK for the two women to talk with the team leader. She told the instructor that the two women felt that the team had misplaced its priorities and was bogged down in details. The instructor responded that the women have the same rights as the men. "Even though they cannot speak English, they are encouraged to speak their minds."

At the end of Day 2, the instructor told the team that it would be nice to see a new team leader the next morning who was not fluent in English and was perhaps a woman. This hint was clearly an attempt to encourage the team to take action to bridge the faultline separating the Russian speaking women from the rest of the team.

An impromptu interview with the instructor provided additional insights into the cause of friction that had led to faultline activation. He remarked that it was obvious that the team members' diversity had a negative influence on team performance. He indicated that management personnel from the German tradition tend to be operationally oriented, that is, they are accustomed to setting a clear goal early and then working systematically to reach it. In their tradition, decisions are made fast and are followed. In contrast, he noted, most of the rest of the group expected to have the opportunity to have their views heard prior to a decision being made. The instructor indicated that he thought that the clash of these divergent cultural norms for decision making led the two German speaking men to act as if they were making all the decisions, caused the others to feel uninvolved, and led all to feel frustrated. In sum, the instructor's comments focused on the faultline separating the German speaking men rather than on the faultline

separating the Russian speaking women. His suggestion that the team make a woman the team leader would take decision making responsibility away from the German men and impose a different norm for team collaboration.

### Day 3

When Day 3 began, the team had followed the instructor's hint. It had appointed one of the Russian-speaking women as the team leader. All shared information (on the whiteboards and clip boards) was now in Russian. For the first time during the exercise, all members of the team were dependent on the translator. The leader worked in a systematic and organized manner. There was relatively little conflict or confusion in the group. Everyone was working and gave the impression of knowing what to do. When the exercise ended at lunch time, the team was calm and structured.

The instructor's hint was a masterstroke. It worked by bridging both long faultlines at once. First, it took leadership away from a subgroup that had a norm for decision making that clashed with the norm held by a majority of the team. Second, it transferred leadership to a subgroup that had felt isolated from the rest of the team since the beginning of the exercise. The exiles were re-involved and the team began to work in a manner that fit the majority's expectations.

## DISCUSSION

### The faultline vocabulary

Conversations with the instructor revealed that he had the implicit knowledge to detect and bridge faultlines due to his extensive experience with crisis response and team work. He did not, however, possess a vocabulary for describing what he saw or for what motivated the actions he took. The faultline metaphor provides a technical and theoretically-grounded vocabulary for addressing sources of friction in small teams. Instructors who are familiar with the faultline metaphor and its vocabulary could use it to predict and communicate why some teams are likely to fall apart while others appear to be able to work seamlessly. Knowledge of the faultline vocabulary might help instructors with less experience detect rifts before they form. Less experienced instructors would likely benefit if they could distribute to team members a self-report questionnaire designed to detect dimensions of demographic and cultural diversity before an exercise.

### Faultline activation and detection

The literature on group faultlines has yet to address the issue of what it is that activates a faultline and causes the group to split (Li and Hambrick, 2005). In this paper, we identify one of the forces that can trigger a rupture: the practice of defensive routines (Argyris, 1993) by members of a subgroup. We suggest that defensive routines are highly observable evidence that a faultline has or will soon rupture.

A defensive routine is "any policy or action that inhibits individuals, groups, and organizations from experiencing embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevents the actors from identifying and reducing the causes of the embarrassment or threat" (Argyris, 1993, p. 15). Examples cited by Argyris include feelings of helplessness, blaming others for the situation, missing meetings, shirking responsibilities, and removing sensitive issues from discussion. Defensive routines are invoked, consciously or unconsciously or both, to avoid conflict and embarrassment. They form protective cocoons that save face (Goffman, 1967) for those who feel threatened.

Defensive routines are manifestly counterproductive for team performance. This counter-productivity makes them likely to trigger the rupture of a faultline. If a homogeneous subgroup, e.g., the German speaking men of the OSOCC team, were to engage in one or more defensive routines, their actions would likely be noticed by the other subgroup(s) and their behavior deemed inappropriate. We expect faultline rupture to follow soon after a defensive routine is noticed and begins to interfere with team performance.

It is ironic that actions taken to save face are likely to activate the faultline that may have been formed by the same diversity in norms that led to the embarrassment or threat. For example, some cultures are comfortable with speedy decision making. Others insist on inclusive contribution. In multinational groups, this mix in norms is not

uncommon. The diversity in norms would form a short faultline. If the group were to adopt either one or the other of these norms, the subgroup that advocates the out-of-favor norm may feel threatened or embarrassed. If they respond by adopting a defensive routine - by missing meetings or by sitting apart or by doing a little bit of everyone else's job - team cohesion may collapse and the faultline may become active. If the defensive actions continue and group fragmentation becomes established, the fragmentation can be difficult to stop. Faultline activation can spawn a reinforcing loop (Senge, 1990) that tears the team apart.

We observed many defensive routines in the OSOCC team. The repeated missing of meetings, the physical segregation of the women, and the aggressive co-opting of other's responsibilities are classic cases of defensive routines. The flip side of co-opted responsibilities is loafing - playing video games - by the co-opted. The helplessness felt by the women was made explicit by the intervention of a compatriot from a different exercise team. Each of these patterns of behavior is evidence that a faultline had activated and that the team had split into subgroups.

### Toolkit development

Instructors and managers need to know whether or not a team is likely to split into subgroups. Teams that split into subgroups are rarely able to regroup and their performance is predictably poor (Early & Mosakowski, 2000; Hackman, 1989). We propose that a *cultural diversity toolkit* would be a clear asset to trainers, trainees, and their organizations. We are developing such a toolkit based on the faultline vocabulary (Lau & Murnighan, 1998, 2005) and Argyris' (1993) defensive routines. It has two parts:

- 1) A questionnaire for assessing team members' characteristics in order to (1) predict subgroup formation prior to staging a field exercise, and (2) identify (individual) team members who may be able to span a ruptured faultline and facilitate team cohesion. When applied to identification of boundary spanners, the kit suggests appropriate actions that the instructor can take to help the team bridge the rift.
- 2) A checklist for identifying defensive routines in order to detect faultline activation at an early stage..

The first tool is a questionnaire that should be administered to all prospective team members before an exercise or mission. It contains a series of questions and ordinal response scales. There are three sets of questions. The first probes dimensions of demographic and cultural diversity. The second is designed to elicit cultural norms for teamwork, task allocation, goal setting, and communication. The third asks about previous experience as a member of multinational teams and attitudes toward intra-team conflict resolution and its resolution. The questionnaire is scored to assess the locations and lengths of faultlines in the team. The scores provide instructors/managers with information that can be used to predict the relative likelihood of subgroup formation or, alternatively, of team cohesion.

A second use of this tool is identification of individuals with the potential to span subgroups. A prime example from the team we studied is the Romanian Press Officer, Participants 6. This bilingual man spoke Russian and had the same profession as the two mono-lingual women. With their shared backgrounds and language, this man had more in common with the women than any of his male counterparts. If anyone were to be able to bring the isolated women back into the fold, it would likely have been the Romanian man. Suggestions for appropriate actions couple the identification of candidate boundary spanners with the topography of the team's group faultlines.

If the instructor at the exercise we observed were to have had access to such a questionnaire, it would have directed attention to the two long faultlines and to the relatively high likelihood of subgroup formation. It would also have identified the Romanian man as a candidate boundary spanner and suggested that the women be encouraged to work with him. Armed with that information, the instructor would have known where to look for defensive routines and could have helped the team head off faultline activation at an earlier stage. It is, however, important to be careful not to end up with a self-fulfilling prophecy by treating the team as problematic from the start. The instructor must await evidence of a rupture before acting. This leads us to the second part of the toolkit, the checklist.

The checklist for defensive routines contain a list of actions that individuals and small groups often take to save face. For each action there are behaviorally anchored scales that can be used to assess the severity or persistence of the action. The checklist is designed to help instructors/managers identify when a team is about to split into conflicting subgroups. It also suggests measures and activities that can impede faultline activation when defensive routines become visible and facilitate the process of team reunification.

While the toolkit is relatively simple, its development is proving to be far from trivial. The complexity of a real-time field exercise puts high demands on instructors. A well-designed cultural diversity toolkit could be an asset to relatively inexperienced instructors. On the other hand, a poorly-designed toolkit might only hinder them. More observational work is needed to develop, test, and validate the instruments. We hope to obtain much of the information we need by observing and interviewing experienced instructors and merging their knowledge with managerial theories, defensive routines, and the group faultline metaphor.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support and access that made it possible to observe the training exercise was provided by the Swedish Rescue Services Agency (SRSA) which is now part of the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency.

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