

# **FINDING COMMON GROUND IN DISPERSED COLLABORATION**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Advances in computing and telecommunications have loosened the bounds of space and time on collaboration. Rather than working at the same time in the same place, many collaborators work from different places and at different times, using technology to mediate their communication. However, such collaboration is vulnerable to five pitfalls of information exchange and interpretation: 1) failure to communicate and remember contextual information, 2) uneven distribution of information, 3) differences in what information is salient to sender and receiver, 4) differences in speed and timing, and 5) uncertainty about the meaning of silence. These all are manifestations of the problem of establishing “mutual knowledge” in dispersed collaboration. Mutual knowledge is knowledge that senders and receivers of communication share in common and know they share in common. Mutual knowledge helps people frame their messages in ways that are likely to be understood without confusion.

Without mutual knowledge, dispersed partners often fail to meet each other’s expectations, damaging trust. In addition, they are likely to make dispositional rather than situational attributions about remote partners when disappointed. In other words, compared with collocated partners, dispersed partners are more likely to conclude that a problem stemmed from the personal failings of a remote partner than from the nature of the situation. This is because people usually have more information and more accurate information about local situations and constraints than about remote situations and

constraints. However, seeing problems as resulting from the dispositions of remote partners is costly because it derails a dispersed team's ability to analyze its situation, learn, make changes, and improve. Recommendations for designers, leaders and members of geographically dispersed teams are discussed.