Creating Teamwork in Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT:
With the many technological advancements taking place, people no longer must work in the same location, or be co-located, in order to work together. With video conferences, e-mail, the Internet, corporate intranets, and sophisticated groupware, it is possible for people to work “together” no matter where they are actually physically located. Virtual teams can transcend distance, time zones, and organizational boundaries. How can these teams, made up of people who may never actually meet, function, much less succeed? Human relations and interaction remain paramount.

KEY WORDS: teamwork, virtual teams, trust, communication, groupware, the Internet

Just a decade ago, when you said that you worked with someone, it meant that you worked in the same office or the same department within the same organization. Today, however, with the advent of new technology, people no longer must work in the same location, or be co-located, in order to work together. With video conferences, e-mail, the Internet, corporate intranets, and sophisticated groupware, it is possible for people to work together no matter where they are geographically based. Now, many people work in virtual teams that transcend distance, time zones, and even organizational boundaries.

Distance-spanning communication technologies have created new territory for “working together apart.” Today we find that work is diffusing rather than concentrating, as we move from industrial to informational products and services. While the use of teams may indeed be on the rise, the face-to-face aspect of normal working relationships is changing dramatically. Global teamwork has become an everyday reality for employees in both big and small companies. Although technology creates business opportunities and enables us to communicate with partners in faraway places, we cannot rely on technology alone to create a sense of commitment or teamwork. Human relations and interaction remain paramount.

Effective teamwork is difficult in the best of times and conditions. Teamwork depends in part on members’ ability to trust one another. Technology cannot substitute for the relationships that foster trust. Successful teams, of all nature, must pay a great deal of attention to building the foundations of sound teamwork. Virtual teams must work even harder to compensate for many of the elements that are inevitably lost when teams work together, yet apart.

Virtual teams must include elements that are timeless and enduring in all successful groups. They also must include features that are cutting edge. The challenge today is to invent and improve virtual teams while retaining the benefits and characteristics of effective teams from previous organizational forms.

MAKING A DISTINCTION: THE MEANING OF “VIRTUAL” TEAMS

It is just within the last decade that the word virtual made its way into “virtually” everyone’s vocabulary! Although its original meaning stems from the Latin root of virtue, or a personal quality of goodness and power, more recent use has brought newer meanings to the term. These more “cyber” meanings include “not in actual fact,” but “almost like,” as in “virtual reality,” “virtual organization,” and “virtual office.” A “virtual team” in fact, creates different images from the one of people working together in the same organization, in the same place.

When we refer to a virtual team, we do not mean for it to be assumed that the team is “not real, but appears to exist.” Rather, virtual teams attest to fast-moving electronic forces that define the very existence of the team. Virtual teams are groups that have “gone digital,” in order to function as a team. They use the Internet and intranets and any electronic media that are real to the groups that inhabit them. A virtual team, like every team, is a group of people who interact through interdependent tasks and relationships, guided by a common purpose. Unlike conventional teams, however, virtual teams work across space, time, and organizational boundaries with links created by communication technologies.

Unlike traditional face-to-face teams, virtual teams routinely cross boundaries through an array of interactive electronic technologies. Socially, however, they lag behind everyday reality. There are no by-chance encounters or meetings, no getting together casually for lunch, passing each other in the hallway, or dropping by one another’s office. A major reason why many of today’s more traditional teams are ineffective is that they overlook the strong implications of the seemingly obvious. Imagine, in the boundary-less virtual team, what occurs when team members ignore how really different they are. Virtual teams must adjust to the new realities of their situations—or fail.

IDENTIFYING DIFFERENCES

Working in multinational, transglobal teams poses certain challenges not usually encountered when a group of people work together in the same building or city. Some of these challenging differences may be quite obvious, as when a group of people are working in different time zones, all over the world. Team members in Shanghai or Singapore are 12 hours ahead of those in New York or Toronto and will have no real opportunity to call
one another during normal business
hours.

Today, many companies use time dif-
ferences to their advantage by transac-
ting business virtually around the clock, but for
people other than bond traders, for exam-
ple, time differences can be frustrating.
Certain types of projects require all over-
seas affiliates (or team members) to partic-
ipate in meetings that may be scheduled
in the headquarters’ time zone. Thus, a
2:00 p.m. conference call with New York
means that team members located in Aus-
tralia and Singapore are sitting around in
their pajamas in the early morning hours
waiting to take part. Such seemingly insen-
titive actions are not likely to help to
build team spirit.

Other problems encountered by
teams whose work literally spans the globe
may be more subtle, yet equally as impor-
tant. Nonverbal communication can ac-
count for as much as 60 percent of the
message an individual conveys. This can
entail the furtive glance, a reddening
neck, or twitching face—clues that often
carry a plethora of important emotions.
Team members who are in separate loca-
tions are deprived of these clues that indi-
cate their colleagues’ opinions, attitudes,
and emotions. Even in the best videocon-
ferencing, facial expressions can be dif-
ficult to pick up if the transmission is poor,
if someone is off camera, or when the
mute button is pressed.

In a cross-cultural, transcontinental
team, members often do not have the op-
portunity to know the people with whom
they are assigned or expected to work.
Extracurricular activities can do more to ce-
ment a team than a cartload of team-
buiding sessions. When all participants
are in the same place, dinners and outings
serve as an invaluable means of breaking
the ice. When social contact is replaced
by e-mail or videoconferences, team
members lose the chance to socialize with
their colleagues, form a more realistic
opinion of them, and bond. How can one
tell online which team member is crushed
by criticism, especially when criticism
makes her clam up. Who is power hun-
gry? Or, who is in need of some hand-
holding? Although not all of the answers
to these questions become apparent dur-
ing an office barbecue, informal gather-
ings go a long way toward developing the
understanding and personal trust that
team members must develop in each
other to weather the conflicts that natural-
ly arise during the course of teamwork.

Completing projects through group-
ware means that team members are isolat-
ed from one another, which increases the
chances for misinterpretation. Groupware
allows information about a project to be
fed into a huge structured database that
can be accessed by all team members.
When databases fail to contain the newest
information, one can sometimes assume
that the virtual team is not working well
together. People then tend to hoard what
they know or share only within their disci-
pline or function, rather than share with all
team members.

SAME ARENA,
DIFFERENT BALL GAME

Regardless of their shape, size, com-
position, or objectives, any team that wish-
es to perform well must recognize some
essential guidelines that must be estab-
lished. Four “team basics” are [3]:

- a sense of interdependency;
- an appreciation of the benefits of
group problem-solving and decision-
making to establish a common ap-
proach for getting work done;
- accountability as a functioning unit;
and
- a common goal/mission/sense of col-
lective purpose.

Generally, the first three basics can be
achieved whether or not team members
work in the same place or location. Of
course, if the team does work separately,
it will need far greater discipline to achieve
the first three basics listed above. Several
pre-team discussions may be necessary to
establish roles, goals, and accountability.
When teams fail to work face-to-face, dis-
cussions must be replaced with frequent
tele- or videoconferencing. Such confer-
encing establishes a sense of progress to-
ward goals and helps to get a clear sense of
what must be accomplished in between
such meetings. In fact, virtual work teams
require more formal communication than
traditional teams, precisely because there
is less informal chatter and social interac-
tions among team members, such as the
type that may take place during birthday
celebrations or coffee-machine chats.
Project team managers may have to
deal with their informal styles of manage-
ment and adapt a more formal approach.
More direct and rigorous project manage-
techniques are needed, especially
with transglobal teams, to ensure that peo-
ple are aware of who does what and by
whom.

But the fourth basic, a common vi-
sion or a sense of collective purpose,
is more difficult to achieve. While having
a purpose is fundamental to all small
groups, teams are specifically and deliber-
ately results-oriented. Tasks are the work,
and the common processes are the means
to the results. However, purpose is what
binds a team to the tasks at hand. Purpose,
in all of its forms—vision, mission, strate-
gies, goals results—lies at the heart of un-
derstanding teams. It is the common pur-
pose that binds team members to the task
at hand. Unlike business objectives, a
common purpose harnesses individual
pride and seizes team members’ imagina-
tions as something worth the effort and
sacrifice. It is often truly developed only
after team members have struggled with
disagreements, debates, and reflection,
and work through the inevitable divergent
opinions to deepen trust and create a
sense of connection. It is the energy that
delivers a team to its highest levels of per-
formance.

Purpose, however, is notoriously dif-
ficult to grasp. It is an intensely personal
process and thrives on frequent face-to-
face meetings. If the performance stakes
are high, the cost of holding face-to-face
meetings before the work begins is highly
justified for virtual teams. Mistakes, mis-
trust, unexpressed viewpoints, and unre-
solved conflicts all too easily spring up and
become part of operating norms. Spend-
ing more time on the front-end and in-
vesting in beginnings is a belief widely
held by experienced team leaders.

The effectiveness of Boeing’s huge
globally scattered team effort has been
widely documented [1]. At the start of its
777 project, Boeing brought members of
the design team from dozens of countries
to Everett, WA, providing them with op-
portunities to work together. From a prac-
tical point of view, for a period of 18
months, they learned how to function
within the company’s project manage-
ment system. The shared experiences also
developed a level of trust between team
members that later enabled them to over-
come the obstacles inevitably raised by
their separation. Linked by a network of 1,700 workstations that spanned more than a dozen countries, the 777 was launched in 5 years—30 to 40 percent faster than comparable paper-based designs. The plane also boasted a 33 percent greater fuel efficiency than the 747, and cost 25 percent less.

**CREATING VIRTUAL TEAM LIFE**

In many situations, it may be impractical to bring a team together for any meaningful length of time. Travel time, costs, and wear and tear on the body all rule it out. The question then becomes can teams that cannot spend time physically together ever be as effective as teams that do?

In theory, the answer is “no!” Teams separated by time and space fail to go through the personal interaction of the level and intensity that is required to create and maintain a common purpose. Since less than 5 percent of teams who do get together ever reach optimal performance [1], it is still possible for remote teams to show superior performance if they concentrate on attaining the first three team basics! In other words, teams who cannot work and play together, must compensate in several ways for the loss of physical proximity. Compensating measures may include some of the activities discussed below.

**Concentrate on Building Credibility and Trust**

When team members have few opportunities to get to know each other, trust and credibility are naturally in limited supply. A lack of trust creates difficulties in decision-making, such as when time delays require team members to miss certain meetings and they must rely on their colleagues to best represent their interests.

Professional judgments made by team colleagues are accepted on the basis of trust, credibility, and integrity. If one does not have an opportunity to consistently observe performance, one can only judge an individual’s integrity on the basis of reputation. Team members, especially those in remote or virtual teams, must pay close attention to the way that others perceive them. Consistency of actions, fulfilling promises, considering other member’s schedules, and responding promptly to e-mail and voice messages help to build positive perceptions.

Reliability is a virtue. In the case of the virtual team, however, it is a necessity! Team members who have been reliable in the past may build strong positive reputations that help them to combat the inevitable problems they encounter, such as poor transmission and delayed responses.

**Create Time Together**

Team processes are expedited by spending more time on the front-end and in reaching consensus in developing procedures. Invest in beginnings! The time spent in the first two phases of a project’s life cycle will be recouped many times over in the latter phases of the project. A lack of clarity about goals, tasks, and procedures hinders a team’s performance in the later, more critical project phases.

**Stress Cooperative Goals**

Cooperation occurs when people have compatible goals or when they perceive that if you succeed, I succeed. Cooperation generates positive feelings of family, community, and a sense of good will that is necessary for the team’s future. A wide range of studies over all age groups indicate that cooperation results in higher productivity than competition or even independent work [4]. The old “tooth and claw” Darwinian competition, which may have been assumed as the natural order of life, is giving way. Cooperation at all levels of biology’s kingdom, from our own microscopic cells to the largest of mammals, may be a factor of successful evolution and survival.

**Keep Communication Constant and Vary the Medium**

A groupware system that offers sophisticated e-mail, conferencing, newsletters, and bulletin board services may encourage more frequent online communication. Monthly team reports are helpful and may be shared with stakeholders interested in the team’s progress.

**Develop a Sense of Shared Space**

When they operate in the same place, teams never need to think about the space in which they work. They can set up meeting rooms, discuss their ideas over the lunch table, or gather around a model or prototype as someone describes a problem. The shared space is the immediate ground, either physical or mental, that people use when they come together to create ideas.

When team members are apart, the issue of shared space becomes more critical. Establishing a communication medium, such as e-mail distribution lists and videoconferencing, on a regular basis with defined procedures, constitutes the team’s shared space, if it is used to discuss ideas.

**Reward Performance**

Punctuate the team’s progress with milestones when the team is given an opportunity to converge and realign its work and purpose.

**Reach Out and Help Someone**

Building credibility and trust may mean sharing information or passing ideas on to others who might benefit. Although altruism seldom brings immediate rewards or recognition, it has the long-term benefit of building a positive reputation and accruing trust.

There may be formidable barriers to overcome in making virtual teams click, but that does not mean it cannot be done. Perhaps we may just have to accept that teams denied the chance to build close working relationships may never be as effective as those that do. We also may realize that teams that are comfortable with each other and with a wide variety of communication and computing technology can become a close second.

**REFERENCES**

Dr. Deborah S. Keszborn serves widely as a consultant and trainer in management and organization strategies for building successful project teams. Her career spans over 2 decades of designing and implementing project management and team-building strategies across a variety of organizational cultures. She has worked for AT&T, 3M, Hoffman-Roche, Warner-Lambert, Philip Morris, IBM, COMSAT, General Instrument, Motorola, Nokia, NASA, the Naval Surface Warfare Center, and other agencies in the US Department of Defense. Dr. Keszborn has served as a member of the faculty of continuing education at Steven’s Institute of Technology, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, and New York University. She is presently teaching in the Project Management Certification Program at New York University’s School of Executive and Professional Education. Dr. Keszborn earned her doctorate in psychology from Fordham University. She is the coauthor of Dynamic Project Management: A Practical Guide for Managers and Engineers and The New Dynamic Project Management: Winning Through the Competitive Advantage. She has written numerous papers on project and technical management. Her papers have appeared in leading publications. Dr. Keszborn was the associate editor of the IEEE’s Communications magazine. She is a longtime member of AACE International and is currently the Co-Chair of the Enabling Technologies Committee.

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