

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 [2]." 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 [4].

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 differences to their advantage by transacting business virtually around the clock, but for people other than bond traders, for example, time differences can be frustrating. Certain types of projects require all overseas affiliates (or team members) to participate 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 Australia and Singapore are sitting around in their pajamas in the early morning hours waiting to take part. Such seemingly insensitive 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 important. Nonverbal communication can account 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 convey a plethora of important emotions. Team members who are in separate locations are deprived of these clues that indicate their colleagues' opinions, attitudes, and emotions. Even in the best videoconferencing, facial expressions can be difficult 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 opportunity to know the people with whom they are assigned or expected to work. Extracurricular activities can do more to cement a team than a cartload of team-building 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 hungry? Or, who is in need of some hand-holding? Although not all of the answers to these questions become apparent during an office barbecue, informal gatherings go a long way toward developing the understanding and personal trust that team members must develop in each

other to weather the conflicts that naturally arise during the course of teamwork.

Completing projects through groupware means that team members are isolated 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 discipline or function, rather than share with all team members.

SAME ARENA, DIFFERENT BALL GAME

Regardless of their shape, size, composition, or objectives, any team that wishes to perform well must recognize some essential guidelines that must be established. 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 approach for getting work done;
- accountability as a functioning unit; and
- a common goal/mission/sense of collective 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, discussions must be replaced with frequent tele- or videoconferencing. Such conferencing establishes a sense of progress toward 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 interactions among team members, such as the type that may take place during birthday celebrations or coffee-machine chats. Project team managers may have to

change their informal styles of management and adapt a more formal approach. More direct and rigorous project management techniques are needed, especially with transglobal teams, to ensure that people are aware of who does what and by when.

But the fourth basic, a common vision 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 deliberately 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, strategies, goals results—lies at the heart of understanding teams. It is the common purpose that binds team members to the task at hand. Unlike business objectives, a common purpose harnesses individual pride and seizes team members' imaginations 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 performance.

Purpose, however, is notoriously difficult 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, mistrust, unexpressed viewpoints, and unresolved conflicts all too easily spring up and become part of operating norms. Spending more time on the front-end and investing 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 opportunities to work together. From a practical point of view, for a period of 18 months, they learned how to function within the company's project management system. The shared experiences also developed a level of trust between team members that later enabled them to overcome 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.

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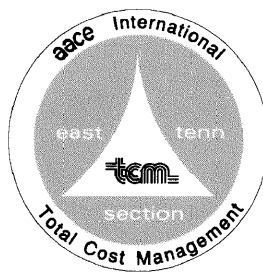
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