

VIRTUAL TEAMS; A SNAP SHOT

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Background

Advances in collaborative technology have enabled organizations, more than ever, the ability to quickly and efficiently conduct business outside of the traditional co-located team office model. This in turn provides advantages by; attracting desired skill sets without geographical limitations; minimized resource redundancy; cost reduction of travel expenditures; increased productivity; reduced re-location spending; containment of facility costs; leveraging time zones to extend availability; and providing direct reach to key client/customers.

The result: distributed team members working together that may never actually meet face-to-face. They may never be in the same time zone, may not share the same 1st language or customs. These teams, primarily enabled by collaboration technology, are referred to as Virtual Teams. They are integrated and coordinated teams, working towards common goals or objectives.

Collaboration tools can include, the use of telecommunication, instant messaging, email, video conferencing, desktop/application sharing, shared development environments, web conferencing, electronic calendaring, blogs, workflow management, on-line resource repositories, transactional environments, project management applications, communities, and of course mobile devices.

Key Challenges – Relationships & Effective Communication

Despite all the potential benefits, there are also trade-offs to consider; the biggest challenge being the ability to develop distant relationships. A relationship is built based on direct engagement and openness over time. It is the basis for having an awareness of an individual's personality, behaviors, communication styles, character, and motivational triggers. From there you are able to know what, how, and when to approach a person when dealing with a situation or activity. When relationships are not firmly established, team dynamics, team cohesion, as well as effective communication and coordination can be adversely impacted.

Another key challenge is effective interpersonal communication dynamics. By far the most effective means of communicating is real-time, face-to-face, where 'words', verbal tone, facial expressions, and body language combine to convey a message. Face-to-face also allows for unplanned and unscripted opportunities of engagement that are not necessarily time bound.

How many of us have had to deal with an email taken out of context for example? Real-time communication enables opportunity to quickly validate questions, and the face-to-face time allows us to assess what is being communicated with more than one variable, e.g.

facial expressions combined with verbal tone, awareness of the person's environmental conditions, etc.

There are of course other challenges such as ensuring adequate functional leadership. Promotional opportunities, personal support, and a sense of attachment to the organization are also areas of consideration. However, the first step is to ensure that foundational team relationships and communication channels are in place.

When Relationships & Communication are Lacking

Without stable and formed team relationships, multiple disruptive symptoms begin to form such as:

- Lacking trust and respect
- Negative perceptions
- Siloed 'water cooler' conversations
- Splintered decision making
- Diminished motivation
- Conflicting efforts

All of which ultimately risk and impact team performance. However, with the right approach, a strong virtual team can be cultivated and sustained.

Cultivating a Strong Virtual Team

3 key areas of focus:

- Leadership Engagement
- Selecting, On-boarding, and Training
- Linguistic Precision and Communication Awareness

Leadership Engagement

More critical than ever is the need for strong, engaged, yet empowering leadership. The playing field is more complex, diverse and intense than ever. The virtual team does not lend itself to taking a quick walk-about thru the office to touch base with team members, organize quick team meetings, nor is it conducive to a micro management work style, if that is even acceptable. The following are just some of the leadership engagement elements to take note of when managing in a virtual environment:

- 1) In order to ensure that a team is in sync, has the support it needs, understands its objectives, and is leveraging the strength of being a team, leadership must ensure continuous contact with all members of their direct team. This takes place in two forms: formal and informal.

The formal should leverage:

- 1:1 sessions to solicit direct and personalized feedback, as well, to provide direct and personal feedback. For best results weekly sessions should be scheduled
- Team sessions to share vision and objectives, review team performance, coordinate efforts, recognize efforts, and provide general updates
- Communities to share resources, provide open channels for ‘team think’ sharing, professional development, networking, knowledge sharing, and news

Informal leverages quick calls, emails, chats, and other modes of communication to ensure progress on tasks. Team members are engaged, and empowered to initiate contact, when needed in order to keep communication lines open.

- 2) Though unintentional, individuals can easily slide into a mindset of 'out of sight, out of mind'. Decisions and discussions can end up being localized, with the assumption that they have no effect, or minimally impact the rest of the distributed team. This is especially challenging for those who have primarily worked in ‘traditional’ team environments, as well as 'would-be' leaders. It is easier to relate, and react, to what physically surrounds you than what isn't.
- Leadership must take a neutral position relative to their own physical location and that of the rest of the team – all are equally part of, and contribute to, the team regardless of location.
 - It is imperative that a leader ensure that ‘water cooler’ conversations impacting the team are taken back to the team.
 - It is imperative that a leader ensure that the team is inclusive.
 - It is imperative that a leader ensure that team members don’t assume discussions or decisions have no impact, do not concern, nor need the insight, of fellow team members.
 - It is imperative for a leader to familiarize themselves with the local working environments of their team members. Varying cultures, customs, and laws can, and do impact how work is done. Knowing how to approach one's team can be a positive way to cultivate the team and direct work. As well, it simply demonstrates interest in your team.
 - It is imperative to have flexibility with time. The more time zones that a team crosses, the more there is a need to be creative with making time to talk. The team should not be the ones to always conform to the time zone their manager works in. If so, respect for the leader will diminish and you will wear out the team.
 - It is imperative that trust and respect be built by:
 - Recognizing people by name when discussing ideas, decisions, and results
 - Listening, acknowledging, and being objective
 - Saying what you will do and then doing what you say in a timely manner
 - Soliciting members by name for thought during team meetings
 - Co-developing career paths

- Applying the appropriate degree of emotional emphasis as it relates to cultural boundaries and circumstances
- Adhering to confidentiality; easy to let go when individuals feel ‘far away’
- Applying patience, especially where there are language differences
- Rolling up the sleeves to help team members

Selecting, On-boarding, and Training

Selecting and then on-boarding the right person has always been a primary concern and focus, however, additional care must be taken to qualify a person with respect to a ‘virtual team fit’. In a traditional environment you can sometimes get away with selecting a team member that may not seem like the perfect fit. This can be offset with the fact that you are physically co-located and able to quickly identify and respond to less than desirable elements should they arise. As well, there is typically an opportunity to provide direct mentorship and shadowing in order to ramp a person up to the desired level of performance needed.

In a virtual environment, despite continuous contact, you are not able to observe everything. Issues that would normally be discovered and addressed in a traditional office environment may not be identified for an extended period of time, adversely impacting team performance and dynamics. A couple of key points to keep in mind in order to ensure you on-board the right person:

- Do some home work, investigate the organizations that a candidate has had history with, ask direct questions regarding your findings to validate previous interview answers, as well as, to understand how aware /connected they were of the organization they represented.
- Make sure questions are raised about how they performed previous work, specific examples of how they worked through issues and conflicts across teams.
- Avoid leading questions; don’t tell them what you are expecting and then ask if that aligns to what they are experienced with or looking for. Ask them to describe what they think works best, what does not, and what they look for in a virtual environment.
- Although this should be standard it is still worth calling out; focus in on the responsibilities of the role you are hiring for; ask the candidate about what experiences align, and/or, how they would approach satisfying the responsibilities of the role.
- Focus in on their work style, communication style, team experiences.
- Request an unplanned written correspondence sample of some sort; with a time limit. Get a feel for their writing skills.
- If an interview is occurring remotely, request to conduct the interview via video or web conference if at all possible. This may provide an opportunity to quickly see how the person reacts and responds to the use of collaborative tools.

- Request the individual to perform a quick on-line task, or test, relating to the role or their expertise. This quickly flushes out those who are familiar as opposed to those who are knowledgeable.
- Have more than one person accompany you in performing the interview. A second perspective on the results may make the difference, as well as, minimize the chances of missing key indicators.
- Validate flexibility in accommodating multiple time zones and work hours, as well as, flexibility to connect from home.

Aside from the typical interview questions, relating to a person's ability to "do the job"; you want to ensure that they can work in a virtual environment with little direct supervision. Selecting members to be part of a virtual team environment that do not demonstrate capability to excel in one is a recipe for failure and frustration.

On-boarding; this is the most critical step in setting the stage for a well functioning virtual team.

- 1) Ensure that the new team member has all the support they need to quickly and efficiently ramp up. Ensure that local resources are in place to help with local logistics and HR needs. If the person is being hired, or contracted, in a location where there is no prior organizational presence you may want to consider bringing them into a main location as a starting point. It is important to instill a sense of belonging and welcoming immediately.
- 2) Maintain and provide on-boarding materials that cover:
 - An overview of your organization; history, structure, culture, products, services, vision, strategy
 - An overview of the team being hired into; structure, environment, culture, communication styles, processes, tools, team members and location insights
 - Specific information relating to organization policies and procedures; HR, IT, Procurement, etc

Make these resources available via an on-line repository.

- 3) Ensure that all new members are introduced and have an opportunity to say a few words at the next available all-team meeting
- 4) Post bio's and profile pictures on an on-line team site, highlight personal interests and experiences

Linguistic Precision & Communication Awareness

Linguistic precision is about choosing and using words that best represent the intent and meaning you are trying to convey in as simple and in as few words as possible. This is important when communicating across teams whose first language is not the same as yours. No matter what form, written or verbal, your choice of words will be important in ensuring that your team members understand and are able to respond as desired. Avoid the assumption that everyone 'should' be able to understand you in the same way you would communicate to a colleague who sits beside you, and who shares the same 1st language.

Depending on the nature of work, and the level of language comprehension, you may want to take language courses in order to become familiar with useful expressions, phrases, and social protocols used by fellow team members. As well, it may be in the best interest to offer language training to team members whose first language is not that of the organizations operational language.

Other Communication Considerations:

- To ensure that what is conveyed is understood ask for feedback, and/or, a replay of what you communicated. If there is any doubt validate before you conclude your time with the team. If there is any confusion, and with a mixture of time zones, you can quickly find yourself losing valuable productive time.
- Employ the practice of taking, or having someone on the team take, meeting minutes. These can provide re-enforcement of what has verbally been communicated.
- Rotate the meeting chair, this provides opportunities to develop individual's confidence and experience in leading a multi-language based team.

At the end of the day how well you and your team communicate, and feel empowered to communicate, will make or break the team. An organization may lack processes and tools and still be able to 'perform', but if those on a team are not communicating effectively they will not perform as desired.

Conclusion

Virtual environments do not foster the same opportunities to build a cohesive, and effective, team as those co-located together. What is important is to understand the dynamics, such as team relationships and communication approaches, which can make or break the effectiveness of those teams. Once those things are accounted for they can, and do, work.