Chapter 8

Working Collaboratively in Virtual Groups

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ABSTRACT

As virtual teams continue to become more prevalent, educational administrators, faculty, and other members of online communities must discover and employ guidelines for effectively collaborating in online contexts. Applying the same traditional team strategies to those working in dispersed groups of people may hinder communication and prevent optimal results. It is time to redefine what constitutes a group and consider new avenues for cooperating in an increasingly diverse, global, and continuously “plugged-in” society. A set of practical steps for why and how virtual groups can collaborate in virtual environments is presented. Tips for implementing the steps are provided. An analysis of technological tools available for facilitating online group collaboration is also shared in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century online educational contexts are inherently diverse, composed of students, instructors and administrators with various career goals, experiences and expertise, technical or otherwise. This being the case, organizational leaders must identify differences among the University’s members and strategically plan for adequate, efficient communication in various formats facilitating collaboration among all members of the institution. This chapter will aid all stakeholders by presenting practical processes and tips for working collaboratively in virtual groups.

This chapter will provide guidelines that educational leaders, faculty, and students can follow to improve communication, manage conflict and work together productively in virtual settings, leveraging technical tools that are free, accessible and easy to use.

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The aim is to advance communication and collaboration in online spaces by focusing on the ways group members can cooperate, fostering personal and professional growth for all.

BACKGROUND

Forty-one million employees worldwide work virtually one day per week as part of virtual teams (The Gartner Group, 2011). Working productively in teams has been and will continue to be critical in many professions albeit, “The nature of collaboration has been changing at an accelerating pace . . .” due in large part to globalization and digitization (Wageman, Gardner & Mortensen, 2012). In addition, “…organizations operate in fast changing global environments that demand flexibility and require the use of sophisticated communication technologies (Cummings, J. & Hass, M., 2012).

Jacover and Jacover (2011) define virtual groups as, “individuals pulled together from various locations to serve as a group participant to achieve a specific objective.” (p. 343). Virtual teams are also variously defined as geographically dispersed, electronically dependent, dynamic, or comprising diverse members working remotely (Gibbs and Gibson, 2006; Gibson and Cohen, 2003; Griffith, Sawyer, and Neale, 2003; Martins, Gilson, and Maynard, 2004; Kirkman and Mathieu, 2005). They are growing in number and importance as evidenced by the fact that, “Nearly a half, or 46 percent, of 379 randomly selected organizations by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), report using virtual teams” (2012).

More than half (53 percent) of human resource professionals whose organizations use virtual teams report the need to include talent in different locations because their work is taking on a more global focus. Roughly half (49 percent) also cite the need to boost collaboration throughout the organization. Additionally, among respondents who reported using virtual teams, 39 percent said their organization uses them to improve productivity. Another 39 percent also use virtual teams to minimize travel costs.

“When virtual teams work, their productivity can be impressive,” said Evren Esen, manager of SHRM’s survey research center. “But getting them to function can be a challenge. Improved technology may help facilitate the use of virtual teams.”

It is time to move beyond standard conceptual paradigms concerning the behavior of groups to better align with their increasingly virtual nature (Hackman, 2012). Therefore, the need for guidelines that facilitate virtual group collaboration is greater than ever as we attempt to prepare for increasingly agile, diverse and virtual workplaces.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Issues, Controversies, Problems

As (future) professionals, we will likely have to cooperate in many a group setting. It can be a positive, productive experience or result in conflict or inefficiencies. Despite the outcomes, the need for group collaboration will continue. “Two trends that are increasingly common in today’s team-based settings include working on multiple teams simultaneously and communicating virtually” (Maynard, M. T., Mathieu, J.E., Rapp, T. & Gilson, L. 2012, p. 343).

A positive, productive experience may result from the variety of perspectives a group can tap into to innovate. Group members also bring unique skills and experiences to share and build upon. In addition, group participants that collaborate effectively create a synergy that can inspire future projects or other groups. On the other hand, one of the main problems with working in virtual groups is lack of communication. When the group has not formerly agreed as to when and how they will communicate it is likely someone will get left out. Another issue is roles and responsibilities. It is important to build in accountability measures
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