

Improving Virtual Teams through Creativity

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INTRODUCTION

Many studies have already shown how a team can become more creative, and therefore more efficient, but only a few researchers have focused on how a virtual team can use creativity techniques to perform better. In this article, we study what differences there are (both in terms of processes and in terms of results) when creativity techniques are used in the management of traditional and virtual teams. To do this, we discuss three main elements: the definition of creativity and its relationships with team performance, the variables that enhance creativity in a virtual team, and the most suitable creativity techniques for a virtual environment.

BACKGROUND

Most researchers and practitioners believe that the key to organizational success lies in developing intellectual capital and acquiring a new set of thinking: the creativity to produce an idea and the innovation to translate the idea into a novel result (Roffe, 1999). Explaining the meaning of creativity is not straightforward; there are thousands of definitions of the term. So, for the purpose of this article, we will understand creativity as the shortest way to search for unconventional wisdom and to produce paradigm-breaking ideas and innovation. This unconventional wisdom through the generation and use of creative knowledge is the key to building sustainable competitive advantages (Carr, 1994).

In order to develop more innovative products, services, or processes, organizations must encourage their employees to become more creative. During the last few decades, several researchers (Andriopoulos, 2001; Nemiro & Runco, 2001; McFadzean, 1998; Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby & Herron, 1996) tried to describe contextual factors largely under the control of managers that influence creativity, though as creativity is a multidimensional concept, there is not a universal theory yet (Walton, 2003). This section focus on how managers and/or team leaders can improve creative climate within virtual structures.

The literature review conducted by Andriopoulos (2001) highlights five major organizational factors that enhance creativity in a traditional work environment: 1) organizational climate, or designing a working atmosphere that fosters participation and freedom of expression; 2) a democratic and participative leadership style; 3) an organizational culture that nourishes innovative ways of solving problems; 4) new resources and skills through the development of human resources creative talent; and 5) a structure and systems that include building flat structures, and rewards, recognition, and career systems that emphasize people creative thinking. Scholars argue that these factors create conditions that enhance creativity both at the team and individual levels.

From a study of the social psychology of creativity, Amabile (1996) cites the three main origins of creative performance as: task motivation, domain-relevant skills, and creativity-relevant skills. She differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, proposing that the intrinsic motivation enhances creativity. In Amabile's research, the work team environment is also considered to exert a powerful impact on creativity by influencing the employee's intrinsic motivation. Management practices indicate that performance can be fostered by allowing freedom and autonomy to conduct one's work, matching individuals to work assignments, and building effective work teams that represent a diversity of skills and are made up of individuals who trust and communicate well with each other, challenge each other's ideas, are mutually supportive, and are committed to the work they are doing (Amabile & Gyskiewicz, 1987). Creativity is best achieved in open climates (Feurer, Chaharbaghi & Wargin, 1996).

These studies have not specifically addressed dimensions that may be necessary when groups no longer interact in traditional structures (Nemiro, 2001). In fact, so far, the only research that has been seriously conducted about this issue is that by Nemiro (2001), who identifies several key elements that influence creativity in virtual teams and therefore result in effectiveness and high levels of performance. Table 1 summarizes some of these factors as described by Nemiro (2001, p. 94).

A creativity-based management aimed at fostering virtual team creativity and performance must manage the

above environmental variables in order to enhance employees' internal drive to perceive every project as a new creative challenge (Andriopoulos & Lowe, 2000).

A quick analysis of the variables shown in Table 1 gives rise to the conclusion that there are no meaningful differences between the factors that affect creativity in traditional environments and those that affect creativity in virtual contexts. On the other hand, most of the factors that influence creativity (such as work characteristics and situational constraints) are also considered as factors that impact team performance, as the conceptual model of Prasad and Akhilesh (2002) shows. Nevertheless, due to the particular way virtual teams work, there is a need to consider some elements related to the previous variables. Thus, communication and trust become very relevant issues.

In this sense, Henry and Hartzler (1998) find that keeping the synergy and creativity flowing, without frequent face-to-face interaction, is the greatest challenge a virtual team has. Virtual teams lose non-verbal communication and, as has been argued, electronic communication increases the level of social isolation. Schein (1993) points out that most communication workshops emphasize active listening, which means paying attention to the spoken words, the body language, the tone of voice, or the emotional content. Virtual teams that want to communicate successfully cannot actively listen in this sense. Other tools must therefore be explored—for example, the use of multiple media or several communication technolo-

gies (Bal & Teo, 2001). However, as Van der Smagt (2000) showed, it is crucial to ensure that dialogue is the primary form of interaction between team members and that two-way monologues are avoided. Rich media—those that transmit nonverbal cues—are not the solution.

“In a dialogue, the difficult part is to make one’s own assumptions manifest, not the exchange of insights with others. The attitude in relation to other actors is one of openness, which makes it relatively easy to get behind the position and possibilities of actors.” (Van der Smagt, 2000, p. 155)

Collaborative work also requires a level of personal familiarity and trust. Without trust, building a true team is almost impossible (Duarte & Snyder, 1999). For most newly forming virtual teams, achieving an effective level of trust is not an easy task. Increasingly, virtual teams will form without the advantage of prior face-to-face team building opportunities, but with the added challenges of geographic isolation, time zone differentials, and cultural diversity (Holton, 2001). With virtual team heterogeneity there is a high probability that team members are confronted with mistrust (Prasad & Akhilesh, 2002), though such diversity within a team has the potential to increase opportunities to be innovative and creative (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997), if trust can be established (Dyer, 1995). But how can trust be built? The qualitative research project of Holton (2001) concludes that standard team-building tools

Table 1. A summary of factors that can foster creativity in a team context

Autonomy and Freedom. Allowing individuals responsibility for initiating new ideas and making decisions; a sense of control over one’s work.

Challenge. Work that is stimulating, engaging, and meaningful; a sense of having to work hard on challenging and important tasks.

Clear Direction. Goals that facilitate creativity are clear, negotiated, attainable, shared, and valued.

Diversity/Flexibility/Tension. Diversity, both in terms of the work assignments offered and the people one interacts with, and a tolerance of differences. In order to be tolerant of differences, flexibility is needed. Both diversity and flexibility can lead to creative tension.

Support for Creativity. An organizational focus on support for or encouragement of creativity.

Trust and Participative Safety. Especially crucial for group creativity is trust and participative safety. The emphasis is on encouraging participation in a non-threatening, non-evaluative environment.

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