



Chapter XIII

Trust, Rationality and the Virtual Team

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Abstract

Virtual teams need trust in order to function. Trust is an efficient way of gaining group cooperation. Online, trust is more effective than instruction or authority or status in getting people who are largely strangers to one another to work together. But trust is not a simple quality. The kind of trust that is the cement of distance relations of a global or virtual kind is different from the type of trust that binds face-to-face interactions and from the procedural kind of trust that operates in regional or national organizations of a traditional managerial kind. This study looks at the ways in which trust between virtual team members is generated. "Trust between strangers" is optimally generated when persons are allowed to self-organize complex orders and create objects and processes of high quality. Also looked at are the kinds of personalities best suited to working in a virtual collaborative environment. The study concludes that persons who prefer strong social or procedural environments will be less effective in a virtual environment. In contrast, self-steering ("stoic") personality types have characteristics that are optimally suited to virtual collaboration.

Introduction

Trust is a crucial medium for organizational action. It facilitates cooperation and coordination of organizations and their agents without them having to rely on more costly and time-consuming legal, managerial, and budgetary arrangements. Trust, however, must be built. Conventional ways of creating trust reflect the nature and rationality of conventional organizations. Such organizations are based on personal hierarchy or impersonal procedures or a mix of both. Trust is created in them through rituals of social interaction or through perceptions of procedural fairness and reliability. By this standard, organization of a virtual kind is not conventional. Work or collaboration at a distance mediated by e-mail is difficult to structure using the means of social contact or formal rules. Underlying this difficulty is the fact that the organization of distance interactions, to be effective, relies on ethical, organizational, personality, and interactive assumptions that often are at odds with other widely practiced managerial and administrative styles.

Entrenched management metaphors, like that of “teams,” have limited applicability in the world of virtual organization. Virtual behavior requires us to think differently about human interaction and association and about the nature of trust. Conventional means of trust building work poorly in a virtual context. Yet, paradoxically, virtual organizations rely on trust to an even greater extent than do face-to-face organizations. In virtual organizations, the actions and intentions of coworkers are often invisible, opaque, or difficult to validate.

To escape the “trust is difficult to establish/trust is more necessary than ever” antinomy¹ in virtual organizations, we need to think of virtual teams or groups as a different genre of organization. In particular, the senior managers who set up virtual organizations need to be conscious of the specific nature of virtual bodies. If they are not, they will misjudge what these bodies can and cannot do. Members of virtual organizations and groups are less amenable and less responsive to conventional management techniques. Virtual collaborators acting at a distance are not in a position to respond to the logic of “we know this person well” or to the procedural rationality of rules, deadlines, Gantt chart milestones, or contractual targets. What they respond to is pattern-based self-organizing collaboration. This is the model of persons working together to create objects and processes, relying on a minimum of rules or social interaction to do so. “Trust between strangers” is generated by their success in creating objects and processes of high quality.

Such collaboration will not suit all personalities in a working environment. Persons who prefer strong social or procedural environments will be less effective in a virtual environment. In contrast, self-steering (“stoic”) personality

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