Chapter 1.26

Successful Communication in Virtual Teams and the Role of the Virtual Team Leader

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ABSTRACT

The world now lives and works in cyberspace. Often, organizations have their people perform functional tasks by working in virtual teams, where members use technology to cooperate across geographic and organizational boundaries. As the use of virtual teams in the workforce becomes more prevalent, those involved must have the knowledge to communicate efficiently and effectively, especially the virtual team leaders. This chapter provides a general overview of virtual teams and virtual team leadership, and discusses specific communication strategies and competencies necessary for virtual team leaders to be effective and successful communicators.

INTRODUCTION

William Gibson coined the term "cyberspace" in his popular 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, defining it as "a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system…unthinkable complexity" (Gibson, 1984, p. 51). While perhaps not as dramatically as Gibson's vivid portrayal, the modern world now works, lives, and communicates in cyberspace. Geography, borders, and time zones are irrelevant in the way today's business and people's personal lives are conducted. "The death of distance" (Cairncross, 1997) and the ubiquitous role of communication technologies are profoundly affecting the economy, business, and social existence (Tapscott, 1998).

For many reasons, including the increasing sophistication of communication technologies, corporate mergers, globalization, the need to respond rapidly to changing markets and customer demands, travel costs, and the trend toward flexibility and mobility in the workforce, organizations must change from the old ways of doing business to new ones (Benveniste, 1994; Smith, 1997; Lurey, 1998). Rapid fundamental changes have created new challenges for leadership (Kielson, 1996). To be successful in today's "cyber" work environment requires a new style of leadership.

Part of this operational shift is for organizations to have their people perform functional tasks by working in virtual teams, where members use technology to cooperate across geographic and organizational boundaries (Rutkowski, Vogel, VanGenuchten, Bemelmans, & Favier, 2002; Gibson & Cohen, 2003). No longer is co-location necessary for communication, interaction, and knowledge sharing (Gerber, 1995; Pliskin, 1998). Virtual teamwork is one of the answers to the modern problems of 21st century organizations (Lipnack & Stamps, 1999).

BACKGROUND

The word "virtual" means "existing or resulting in effect or essence though not in actual fact, form, or name" (Websters, 1984). The meaning of "virtual" today has been extended to suggest greatly enhanced effects or actions, physical behavior of non-physical (often electronic) entities, and the use of telecommunications and computing technologies (Grenier & Metes, 1995). The concept of the virtual organization relies on two key factors: new ways of managing people, and communicating by the movement of electronic information across cyberspace to provide new functionality and new capability (Norton & Smith, 1997).

Technologies that facilitate computer-mediated communication (CMC) have transformed the world in several ways. CMC has dramatically increased interconnectivity and has arguably shrunk the world, as people are able to communicate in ways that were once impossible (Olaniran, 2004). Social networks have broadened to include individuals people have not physically met and often those they may never meet in person.

There has also been an increased trend toward globalization practices. The globalization process involves various aspects of contemporary life such as economy, political and international relations, culture, and religion, in which multiple communities become interconnected (Monge, 1998). With globalization, however, comes the need for organizations to use communication technologies to coordinate their activities in multiple locations and around the globe. Consequently, relationships are cultivated and collaboration on a daily basis is encouraged among individuals who are spatially distant (Olaniran, 2004).

Drucker asserts "changes in concepts will in the end be at least as important as the changes in tools and technology" (Drucker, 1999, p. 101). The virtual worker must have the knowledge and the technological tools to successfully communicate at a distance. Working in virtual teams requires a different skill set, particularly so if the virtual team is to be effective. As the use of virtual teams becomes more prevalent in business and industry, those involved must have the knowledge to communicate efficiently and effectively. This is especially important for the virtual team leaders.

There are still some constants in good leadership practices regardless of the environment, but a new paradigm for leadership is emerging. The virtual environment is changing leadership roles (Montgomery & Clancy, 1994; Harris, 1998). Just because a particular leadership style is effective for communicating in a face-to-face environment does not mean it will work in a virtual setting. Working in a computer-mediated environment requires a "set of traits, skills, abilities, and leadership styles different from those required in the face-to-face communication environment" (George & Sleeth, 2000, p. 303). Many traditional

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