

Chapter 22

Team Dynamics in Virtual Spaces: Challenges for Workforce Training, Human Resource Development, and Adult Development

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration within virtual environments is an increasingly important aspect of organizational and workplace activities. “Virtual teams” are intentional groups of highly qualified people brought together in a virtual environment in order to capitalize upon each member’s unique attributes. In many instances these people represent different organizations, or branches of an organization, who work together virtually to tackle a specific problem or project. This paper examines issues that “virtual teams” encounter and identifies best practices that can positively contribute to effective and efficient teamwork within the virtual environment. The ideas and practices presented may be of value to organizational leaders, planners, human resource professionals, adult educators, and others involved in workforce training.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to examine team dynamics in a virtual environment and identify ways to make them successful. Collaboration within virtual environments is an increasingly

important aspect of workplace activities. It is up to organizational leaders, planners, human resource professionals, adult educators, and others involved in organizational development to identify and establish best practices that make virtual team work positive and productive.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1601-1.ch022

BACKGROUND

In the best of circumstances, teambuilding occurs naturally as people work together, form alliances and establish collegial relationships. However, in reality this is often not the case and a more attentive approach is needed. Team members are prone to experience anxiety in the team forming process. They wonder how the team will work together, whether they will be liked and whether they will like the people they are working with. Teambuilding activities can help alleviate some of these feelings by consciously providing shared experience and goals (Brown, Huettner, & James-Tanny, 2007).

When building a team it is important that everyone feels included and welcome. Team members should be involved in initial planning and goal setting. Facilitators should watch for signs of social isolation, encourage participation from everyone and create an environment that promotes active engagement. Early in the process, there should be an open discussion about team expectations, policies, and practices. Both team and individual efforts should be recognized. Some best practices suggested by Brown, Huettner & James-Tanny (2007) include:

- Negotiate goals together
- Document expectations, goals, position descriptions and contact information
- Hold regular team meetings and allow time to check in with each member at the beginning of the meeting
- Provide frequent and timely feedback
- Maintain a positive, constructive attitude even when things go wrong
- Focus on strengths (Brown, et al., 2007). Group success requires members to be willing to share their efforts and accomplishments, and work to meet clearly defined goals (Odgers, 2005). It is important that team members have incentives to participate. Some benefits of being on a team

are experience, recognition, and visibility. The high-energy and motivation created through effective teamwork is contagious and leads to a special synergy whereby employees and administrators attain extraordinary results. Characteristics of effective teams include:

- The members are loyal and committed to one another and the leader.
- The members and leaders have a high degree of confidence and trust in each other.
- The group is eager to help each other develop to reach their full potential.
- The members communicate fully and frankly about everything relative to the team.
- The members feel secure and empowered to make decisions.
- The atmosphere and climate is supportive and risk free, and members put the organization first (Odgers, 2005).

Virtual teams are an important component of many corporate and educational organizations, and have evolved largely because of globalization, technology, and changing demographics (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Virtual teams are composed of members who are physically located in different places. They conduct most of their work through electronic technology. Team members rarely meet face-to-face and rely primarily on digital forms of communication. Effective communication that leads to a shared understanding of the teams' purpose, goals and objectives is vital for success.

For purposes of this discussion, virtual teams are defined as more than typical groups of people who work together in a virtual environment. Instead, "virtual teams" are defined as intentional groups composed of identified individuals who have special talents/skills/knowledge related to the goals of the team. Teams are brought together for a specific reason and purpose. In many instances these will be groups of people who represent dif-

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