

Virtual Teamwork in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

In modern organizational environments, education included, teamwork is an essential skill that employees must possess to work effectively with others. Johnson and Johnson (1994) substantiate that “society has moved from manufacturing based work on which individuals generally competed or were independent from each other to information and technological-rich work in which individuals generally work in teams” (p. 1017). Dyer stated (Cherrington, Bischoff, Dyer, Stephan, and Stewart, 2001) that “in every organization people must work together in some form of collaboration or teamwork so the combined efforts are productive and people are helping each other rather than blocking or hindering each other” (p. 521). According to Gregory-Dawes (2000), a team functioning properly allows a group of people to give information and material to each other and adds a unique quality to problem solving, referred to as “synergy.”

However, working collaboratively within a team does not come naturally to many people. Moran, Musslewhite, and Zenger (McKendall, 2000) show that although organizational teams are more prominent in organizations than ever before, 50% of all team initiatives fail. Additionally, Hofstede (McKendall, 2000) states that it is not to be assumed that people entering today’s workforce come with developed teamwork and collaboration skills. Instead, the ability to work within a team is a skill that must be learned and continually improved. Teamwork, therefore, is not always an easy process, does not come naturally to individuals, and must be provided in the form of ongoing training for team members so that optimal team performance can be achieved.

Research has shown that working as a team is not an easy task when approached in a face-to-face setting. Working in a distance environment, however, adds unique challenges to a virtual group due to team separation in time and space. Gibson (2006) illustrates that technology has altered the team-building environment from that of the face-to-face situation we knew

a decade ago. Teamwork in any setting necessitates collaboration skills. Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, and Conceicao-Runlee (2000) elaborated that in the online environment, immediate, informal, visual, and verbal feedback are not always present in the way that many are accustomed to having face-to-face communications. Many students feel isolated and lonely in the online environment due to the lack of normal face-to-face social clues (Nevgi, Virtanen, & Niemi, 2006). The online environment can allow for sensitive topics to become misinterpreted and immediate feedback may not be as available in spoken conversation. Hanna et al. (2000) also explained that the online atmosphere is more challenging than the face-to-face environment because conversation is separated by distance, time, language, and the lack of other normal communication methods such as facial expression.

BACKGROUND

Unfortunately, not all students who enter a Distance Education program have academically received the required skills needed to work collaboratively within a team. Paretti, McNair, and Holloway-Attaway (2007) suggest that although today’s students are knowledgeable in using virtual collaboration for personal and social needs, they are not able to transfer this knowledge into the professional setting and as a result need instruction to enable them to manage virtual team environments. Grzeda, Haq, and LeBrasseur (2008) found that team-building exercises are effective learning activities in online courses and stressing the importance of team processes and team skills are valuable to online students. Dyer (McKendall, 2000) recognizes that schools should be teaching students to work in teams but instead give only lip service to the process because they themselves do not know how to teach these skills. Justifiably, teamwork is an essential skill in today’s society, and associated skills of group collaboration are necessary to function effectively in an online setting.

Henderson (Chiarelli, 2000) acknowledged that in only a few short decades, technology has taken us from an industrialized economy to an age of information in which wealth is earned by the ability to analyze, process, and utilize information. Because information in modern organizations is easily obtained, companies have lost their hierarchy; employees have found themselves with ever increasing responsibilities. This newfound level of a working situation has created the need for organizations to develop teams to solve many of the more specialized problems that only managers handled in the past. Consequently, team building and team training have become prevalent in the business arena to empower employees to work within teams.

Because modern business environments necessitate teamwork, education has been obligated to modify the traditional lecture-based education to a richer and authentic problem-based learning venue to better prepare graduates for the work force. Educational institutions have changed the method in which they deliver instruction with online classes becoming more feasible and economical for both the institution and the student. However, before educators can effectively develop working teams, the issue of team training should be addressed.

Just as in the organization, educators cannot assume that students possess team skills and have worked previously within team scenarios. With the addition of Distance Education and the irregular conditions of learning in a nontraditional environment, it is essential that students learn how to build learning communities to achieve worthwhile results in practical problem-based learning situations. Team building and training exercises enable distance students to become better contributors to, and directors of, their own learning through collaboration.

To better illustrate proficiencies that virtual teams need to operate effectively, McKendall (2000) explained various individual skills closely associated with successful teamwork which include:

1. The ability to understand individual differences, personalities, skills, working styles, perspectives, and personal agendas.
2. The capacity to obtain and use effective communication skills to diplomatically relay one's own opinion to a group.
3. The skill of good perceptions and principles to overlook initial impressions.

4. The capacity of collaboration so as to allow others on the team to participate equally.
5. The talent of problem-solving skills to enable the team to propose solutions.
6. The facility of decision-making abilities to help the team form a consensus.
7. The capability to provide leadership as needed to enable the team to grow.
8. The expertise to resolve conflict to further the team's positive direction.
9. The ability to objectively evaluate others and accept constructive criticism from teammates.

TEAMWORK IN THE DISTANCE EDUCATION SETTING

Group dynamics is significant in the understanding and implementation of team development in the on-line setting. McDonald (1998) disclosed that whether people are meeting at a distance or face-to-face, they still encounter similar interpersonal issues at specific phases. Furthermore, Gunawardena (McDonald, 1998) declared, "Computer-mediated communication creates a unique social climate that impacts interactions and group dynamics online." Uhlfelder (1997) explained, "A simple way to think about group dynamics is that it refers to the attitudes, energy, exchange, and interaction of group members and leaders" (p. 69). When watching a team in action, forces generally can be felt within the group, such as subgroup alliances, group conflicts, lack of trust, and power plays. Sosik and Jung (2002) added that Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) explained how interactions influence group processes and outcomes. AST shows that social structures are formed by norms and values (e.g., rules, resources, and behaviors) and emerge within groups as they interact over time.

Group dynamics and their inherent positive and negative inconsistencies and conflicts exist in every team (Uhlfelder, 1997). Conflict, within reason, is not always unhealthy (Cheser, 1999). Capozzoli (1999) added that the western world is based on individualism and competition that support conflict in teamwork. Conflict is intangible when it is within one's mind but becomes tangible when it manifests into fighting, arguing, and brooding within a team. When this occurs, it becomes either constructive or destructive (Capozzoli,

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