Chapter 19
Developing Project Team Cohesiveness in a Virtual Environment

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ABSTRACT

As more projects require the specialized technical skills of those who work in virtual environments due to dispersed geographic locations, project managers of these distributed virtual teams (DVT) must gain insight into achieving project success amongst team members who hold varying operational and world perspectives. When organizational managers decide to implement virtual teams (VT), can they develop strategies to overcome the lack of social interaction, cultural differences, and preconceived notions that can hinder the development of a collaborative and cohesive team? In addition, leading DVTs in a manner that encourages collaboration, diversity, competency building, open communication, and over-coming feelings of isolation must be met in this technology-based environment. This chapter addresses the dilemma of managers in which they must have a clear understanding of what communication and relationship-building techniques and management systems are best suited.

INTRODUCTION

The emphasis of this chapter is on dispersed project management team members who rarely meet face-to-face and how cohesiveness in performance and expectations can be achieved. In addition, a key discussion in this chapter is to gain knowledge that can assist virtual team leaders and organizational project managers in understanding individual perceptions of project success for virtual teams, based on the individual perceptions of team members. The chapter provides insights into what behaviors, tools, and techniques are indicators to virtual team members that they are effectively attaining project objectives. The chapter may help organizations determine where to focus training initiatives for project managers and virtual team members and what communications systems project managers need to use to achieve

a cohesive understanding of project objectives for effective performance in the absence of face-to-face communication.

To achieve these objectives, seminal research on different aspects of the dispersed virtual project management team were reviewed. Specifically, beginning with Eveland and Bikson (1988) as to what defines the virtual team and to distinct elements identified by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) that help or hinder the virtual teams' ability to achieve project success and trust effectively has been evaluated. The literature reviewed in this chapter has also included scholarly works by Jarvenpaaa and Leidner (1999) and Kayworth and Leidner (2000) that examine communication and the role of a leader in the virtual team.

The original research conducted and the studies reviewed for this book chapter show that virtual teams are central to the success of today's organizations that must compete in a worldwide marketplace to understand how the global virtual team is affected by technology. However, scholars examining the changeable nature and individual perceptions of the dispersed virtual project team itself suggest that there is a need to understand how to effectually encourage a collaborative and collectively minded environment. This is key to gauging the future success of the team and the health of the project in which the members contribute to.

BACKGROUND

Project management as a profession caught on in the mid-1950s and the discipline, methods, principles, and tools have evolved over the ensuing years and decades (Padar, Pataki, & Sebestyen, 2011). As more organizational leaders see the need to develop higher benchmarks for implementing strategic planning and tactical execution of projects, senior leaders are endorsing the standardized tools and techniques espoused through professional project management guiding principles. The key benefits of utilizing project management strategies include not only focusing on measuring project success through schedule, budget, and scope components, but additionally by focusing on developing the practitioners' level of insight into effective leadership and communication skills.

More clarity is needed to explain how effective project managers use team communication and relationship-building and management elements in dispersed virtual project teams to influence the overall project success when team members have less face-to-face interaction. In the 1990's, Hallam (1997) conducted a quantitative study of 2,000 team members from all across the United States and from various industries in an effort to understand the complexities of work team structures and dispel common beliefs about team effectiveness.

Hallam (1997) illustrated one such commonly held belief that as individuals work together in teams, they develop one general idea about what is going well and what is not going well on a team. The ability to maintain independent thought was believed to hinder the work teams' capacity to come together in a collective effort to achieve project success. Findings showed that each member has their own experience and perception as to what is working successfully and what is not in team projects (Hallam, 1997). However, what we need to understand thoroughly is if this same finding holds true on a dispersed virtual project team where constant communication is lacking and an interrelationship exists in which one change is likely to influence multiple factors and end results.

In addition, another belief examined by Hallam (1997) was that people typically dislike working on teams. This myth too has been dispelled as research findings indicated that surveyed team members

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