

# Collaborative Approach to Successful Virtual Team Leadership



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## INTRODUCTION

*Beth is a very bright, energetic 35-year-old mother of two who recently returned to college to pursue her master's degree in business education. Beth teaches full-time and her school-aged children are very active in sports, music and social activities. Because of Beth's busy lifestyle, she chose to enroll in the 100% online option for completing her degree requirements.*

*This semester, Beth is taking a course in Second Life virtual world, which investigates the pedagogical and theoretical implications of integrating Web 2.0 technology tools in the classroom. There are numerous individual and two team assignments. Beth usually likes working with team members because it gives her an opportunity to meet other people like her and they can share their stories about work, family and school. When Beth found out she had a team assignment due for the final project, she was the first person to send out an email to the other four team members getting everybody organized. She was very active getting the team work plan together and helping everybody determine what role they would play to get the project done right well before the due date.*

*During the first virtual team meeting, Beth found herself disengaging with the other team members and not really wanting to participate. She didn't really pay attention to the chat content and didn't engage with the other team members. The other team members were anxious to get the work accomplished, so nobody took time to check with Beth to see why she wasn't participating. Beth missed several key due dates and didn't actively participate in the writing, editing or completion of the final paper. When the other four members wrote up their final team member assessments and group reflection, they all commented that Beth did not fully participate and wasn't a team player. Beth's score was significantly lower than the remaining team members.*

*Why did Beth, a straight-A student with strong interpersonal and team skills reduce her performance in a virtual group setting and engage in social loafing?*

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR VIRTUAL TEAMS

Second Life (SL) is a social virtual world, which emphasizes the general use of immersive worlds for supporting a variety of human activities and interactions, presenting a plethora of new opportunities and challenges for enriching how we learn, work and play (Boulos, Hetherington, & Wheeler, 2007; Prasolova-Førland, Sourin, & Sourina, 2006). SL has opened up new opportunities for real time collaboration in immersive, three-dimensional (3D) rich environments regardless of user's geographical distance, allowing users to more readily engage with the experiences as they are disclosed in real time

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(Gazzard, 2009). In SL, the user is represented as an avatar, a virtual representation and embodiment of the user, facilitating movement, choice, and interaction within the virtual environment. An individual's personification with their avatar is the key to an immersive experience (Gazzard, 2009). A key tenet of SL is a collaborative environment which supports team work.

Skills we teach in the higher education classroom train students to be leaders once they graduate and enter the workforce. Team building is an essential skill for students in the classroom and then essential as they enter the work place; coupled with technology, students who have grown up immersed in it (digital natives), literally thrive in the virtual experience. Virtual teams have become increasingly prevalent within the contemporary workplace and have gained significant importance over the past decade. A corporation's ability to successfully facilitate virtual teams and support their technological needs has become a critical imperative (Herman 2001; Lewis & Allen, 2005). Higher education must prepare and train students to successfully take their place on virtual teams following graduation.

With clear objectives to cut costs and increase productivity among workers, many organizations have adopted virtual teams. Virtual teams rely on interactive technology so members can work together when separated by physical distance (Gibson, Ivancevich, & Konopaske, 2006). Governmental agencies, public profit and non-profit, as well as private sector organizations make use of virtual teams, employing various technologies, including synchronous and a-synchronous communication tools supporting teamwork within business and educational environments.

Despite increasing reliance upon work teams and the technologies supporting them, key questions remain unanswered regarding process losses within any technology-supported team, whether they operate virtually or face-to-face (Chidambaram & Tung, 2005). When virtual teams are given full support from the organization and still fail to effectively produce a solid work product, key issues need to be examined. Social psychologists have investigated the concept of social loafing, which is a phenomenon where workers exhibit a decrease in individual effort when performing in groups as compared to when they perform independently (Einstein & Scott, 2001). This loss of effectiveness is in addition to decreases attributable to faulty coordination of group efforts (North, Linley, & Hardgraves, 2000). Situations like this develop into problematic issues in the context of higher education because of the emphasis put on collaborative group work in the online classroom. Research indicates that group size plays an important role in the ability of individuals to develop social loafing habits (Suleiman & Watson, 2008).

This study proposed to create a rich team learning experience for students enrolled in an online Web 2.0 Technology Tools & Virtual Teams course and even more complex, incorporating collaboration with team skills in combination with real-world research. The key goal for students in the course was, as a team, to develop a set of best practices for successful virtual teams and to develop a plan to alleviate social loafing within the group. Additionally, this researcher felt it was imperative that students made the connection between being an active participant within the team while developing a theoretical understanding for the principles they were studying. This experiential approach to team dynamics allowed the students to learn best practices by doing best practices (learning by doing). Experiential learning offers students opportunities to learn through hands-on practice. The researchers, as classic follower of Dewey's experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938), which purports that everything occurs within a social environment, our role as educators is to organize the knowledge, content and experiences into material that can be facilitated into quality learning experiences. According to Dewey's theory (1938), upon completion of the experiential-based course, students should have gained the knowledge and the ability to apply the information learned to different situations outside the learning environment. Additionally, experiential learning can apply to any kind of learning through experience, and is often utilized in education to refer to a structured learning sequence which is guided by a cyclical model of experiential

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