

Virtual Teams, Technology, and Leadership: A Primer

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INTRODUCTION

A team can be loosely defined as a group of two or more people with complimentary skills working together to meet a common goal. The complex interactions occurring among the members of a team are a key determinant of team success, and leading teams to success can present a challenge. In the worst case scenario the team interactions break down to a point at which achieving the goal becomes impossible. On other hand, the pooling together of knowledge, skills and ideas of a group of people, or collective intelligence of the team, is instrumental in addressing complex problems and achieving complex outcomes which would otherwise be too great for any single individual to handle.

In today's dynamic world organizations are facing very complex challenges related primarily to globalization, competitiveness, unstable economies, emerging technologies (Tohidi, 2011). Organizations are facing escalating and more complex demands from businesses and consumers alike (Tohidi, 2011). As complexity and demands of the business environment increases, organizations have found that the traditional strictly hierarchical, top down organizational structures which have long characterized organizations (Minssen, 2005) are no longer adequate. Unsurprisingly, organizations are redesigning in an attempt to implement organizational structures which are better suited to tackling the dynamic, unstable and complex environment within which they are operating. Organizations have found that harnessing the collective intelligence of teams can provide benefits such as increased profitability, efficiency and alignment to business needs. Consequently, team based units have become a predominant feature organizational structures. Teamwork is playing a central role in the decentralization of organizations (Minssen, 2005). Implementing team based structures within the organization has the effect of flattening hierarchies and dispersing responsibilities horizontally rather than vertically. The old 'give an order and carry it out' steering formula of hierarchical structures cannot be maintained (Minssen, 2005). This does not necessarily mean that all hierarchy is dispensed with but instead there is a shift from "giving and carrying out orders to agreement" (Minssen, 2005, p. 104)

Of course, although teams are important, if not necessary, for addressing complex problems, establishing a team-based organization is not straightforward nor easy. The "logic" of team based organizations is quite different to that of traditional hierarchical organizations (Mohrman & Quam, 2000). In traditional hierarchical organizations the unit of performance is an individual, whereas in team based organizations, it is the team which is the unit of performance. The challenge is then to ensure there is both cohesiveness among team members such that they are working as a unit, and also that there is communication and co-ordination among team units in order for the various units to work together for the benefit of the organization (Mohrman & Quam, 2000).

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As if establishing teams and creating conditions for team building and ongoing team effectiveness are not difficult enough, today's organizations are facing yet another necessary challenge: virtual teams and oftentimes global virtual teams. Virtual teams are groups of individuals working to a common goal across space, time, organizational boundaries, and sometimes across cultural boundaries. The impetus for the formation of virtual teams is driven largely by Web 2.0 technologies which have enabled various forms of synchronous and asynchronous interactions among individuals and organizations outside local confines. A driving force for globalization, Web 2.0 technologies have dramatically changed the nature business and the interactions among both businesses and consumers. Organizations today cannot afford to ignore the rest of the world and the implementation of virtual teams within organizations is often not a matter of choice but rather a matter of necessity for survival.

Against such a background, strategic leaders and managers are now confronted with envisioning and strategy development within a more distributed model of organizations. Building and sustaining effective teams in such an environment must proceed on an understanding of the nature of virtual teams. The author's rationale for the writing the present chapter is thus to highlight major features of virtual teams and to bring to the fore core issues related to these features which impact significantly on team performance.

Team Basics

Prior to discussing virtual teams, it is useful to provide some background by first defining considering team formation and then briefly considering the key influences, as documented in literature, on team performance.

The notion of teams as a valuable organizational structure is certainly not new. Teams have been used to achieve complex or large goals from the beginning of time. It is in more recent times that the construct of a team has been formally investigated as part of the field of human resource development (Bonebright, 2010). Given that the composition of teams and the team development process is a key determinant of team effectiveness, there is now much literature surrounding team formation and dynamics.

Perhaps one of the most well known and influential works related to team formation is the Tuckman model created in 1965 (later revised in 1977 by Tuckman and Jensen), at a time when there was a deficiency in literature related to teams. According to the Tuckman model (Tuckman, 1965), when the team lifecycle goes through four stages of development: forming, storming, norming and performing.

The forming stage is a relatively unproductive and is characterized by role uncertainty, attempt to define the goal/job, feelings of anxiousness arising from role uncertainty, and looking towards an external leader for guidance. Forming is about 'testing and dependence' (Bonebright, 2010).

The storming stage represents the most turbulent stage of team formation. At this time conflict and lack of unity is the predominant feature (Bonebright, 2010).. In this stage there is growing confidence, rejection of outside authority, resistance of team members to the demands of the task and a sense of uncertainty about roles prevails alongside concern over the team hierarchy.

Assuming an unscathed emergence from the storming stage, the team enters the norming stage. At the norming stage, cohesion among team members emerges. There is more open exchange of views about the team and although there is some concern on the part of individuals about being different and fitting in with the team, people become more accepting of each other and harmony tends to prevail. The most productive stage is the performing stage. In the performing stage the emphasis is on 'getting the job done'. What Tuckman refers to as 'functional role relatedness' (1965, p. 387) characterizes the performing stage of the team lifecycle. There is efficient allocation of resources and procedures and processes

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