

Training Techniques for Developing Trust in Virtual Teams



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INTRODUCTION

Trust among team members is a major factor influencing the cohesiveness of the group, trust also has a direct impact on team performance, problem solving, organizational performance, and organizational communication. Virtual teams are teams in which members are distributed and communicate via computer-mediated communication systems (CMCS). Past research has indicated that the development of trust among team members requires face-to-face communication, thereby making it difficult for virtual teams to develop trust. Recent research has shown that it is possible to train virtual teams to exhibit higher levels of trust. This paper describes and discusses different methods of trust training for virtual teams. We offer a comprehensive comparison of the results and analysis of the training programs of these studies and offer advice on developing and conducting such programs.

BACKGROUND

A virtual team is geographically distributed and members communicate primarily via computer-mediated communication systems. One of the main factors that has been shown to affect successful virtual team communication, and has received considerable interest in the literature, is trust. The amount of trust between team members has a direct impact on team performance. Trust also plays a critical role in problem solving (Zand, 1972), organizational performance (Hart, Capps, Cangemi, & Caillouet, 1986), and organizational communication. However, many researchers indicate that building trust requires face-to-face communication,

making inter-member trust difficult to obtain in virtual teams. It has been shown in previous studies that it is possible to train virtual teams to develop higher levels of inter-member trust but virtual teams generally do not receive training on how to effectively promote the development of trust and how to work effectively in a virtual environment.

The development of relational links (RL) among team members has been found to be a significant contributor to the effectiveness of information exchange (Chidambaram, 1996). Cohesiveness measures the extent to which members are attracted to the group and to each other and is related to Walther's idea of affiliation motive (Walther, 1999). Group cohesiveness has been linked to a number of positive outcomes such as enhanced motivation, better decision making, and more open communication (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner 1998).

In the following section, we discuss the training methods used to enhance RL and trust among team members. We then describe, discuss, and compare three separate studies that used these training methods with face-to-face and virtual teams. All three studies implemented the training with virtual teams working together on a series of tasks and offered empirical results. We attempt to extract some commonalities from these studies.

TRAINING

Training was initially developed for the first study discussed next. The training was then modified for subsequent studies. Both relational link (RL) training

and trust training (TR) were developed.

Relational link training consisted of three parts: first, participants were informed of possible benefits (see Table 1) and drawbacks to CMCS, referred to as process gains and losses (Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, & George, 1991), such as information overload and “free riders”, along with possible mechanisms for addressing these problems.

Other benefits from using a CMCS are:

1. More time to formulate responses to other team members, since an immediate response is not required as in a face-to-face meeting;
2. Equal opportunity for participation (this is not always possible in face-to-face meetings where one member may dominate);
3. Enable larger group meetings; and
4. Access to extended information.

However some drawbacks to CMCS systems exist such as:

1. Leaner communication channel: this implies
 - a. no para-verbal communication such as tone of voice, inflection, or voice volume is available to supply more information to one’s message; and
 - b. no nonverbal communication such as eye movement, facial expressions, hand ges-

tures, or body language.

2. Virtual teams may be more task oriented and may exchange less social information resulting in less creativity and less motivation.

Overcoming CMCS Drawbacks

Second, participants were introduced to the rules of netiquette (Malone, 2004) and were given examples of common “emoticons” to assist in communication and for sharing socio-emotional cues. Participants were educated about the common misunderstanding and misinterpretations which can occur between virtual teammates. They were presented with some basic tools to expand the media richness (or “emotional bandwidth”) of their communications channel when sending electronic messages, especially to denote sarcasm or jokes.

It is possible to overcome these drawbacks with actions on the part of virtual team members. The following are recommended: (1) defining the objective of the meeting and/or task; (2) drawing out the silent or non-contributing members within the meeting; (3) recommending or requiring “relational communication” messages such as having group members “electronically” introduce themselves, and setting a more informal and personal tone using “emoticons” (Table 2) to help replace the para-verbal and nonverbal communication that is lost with textual messages; and (4) using task-

Table 1. CMCS features and benefits

Feature	Benefit
Simultaneous Input	More input, less time, broader participation Less dominance
Anonymity	Focus on ideas rather than the contributor of the Idea, enhanced ownership of the final product since more (all) team members can participate
Process Structuring	These systems generally provide process structure, improve topic focus through the use of hierarchical displays, facilitates agenda control
Electronic Recording/ Display	Immediate display of data, enhanced group Memory since all comments are recorded and available
Extended Information Processing Capabilities	Easy access to all information from the meeting

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