Chapter 4.33
Virtual Teaming

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INTRODUCTION

Given the ongoing advances in technology and the consequent changes in the work environment with the introduction of a mobile workforce, it is inevitable that more activities will be undertaken by virtual teams.

As with any team, a virtual team is a group of people who share a common objective and combine to provide a variety of different and complementary skills in order to achieve that objective. Unlike traditional teams, they are not collocated and can be working from a variety of different geographical locations, which can be either office or home-based. Often, they work across different time zones, adding to the challenges involved in successfully bringing a team together.

BACKGROUND: THE STAGES OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Tuckman (1965) identified four stages of team development which detailed a process that all teams need to work through:

1. Forming: When teams first come together, knowing little about each other and the project.
2. Storming: When roles and responsibilities are being clarified, and team members are striving to establish their position within the team.
3. Norming: When trust is established between team members and communication becomes more open and honest.
4. Performing: When the team members undertake the tasks at hand.

Virtual teams go through the same stages, but this needs to be facilitated by a strong and competent team leader. Steps 1 and 2 are essential for trust to be established between the team members; therefore, team building sessions need to be scheduled to allow this to happen. Time has to be built into the schedule to enable the members to get to know each other and their respective roles within the team.

BUILDING A VIRTUAL TEAM

Bringing together a virtual team requires strong management, communication, and facilitation skills. Often, the team leader is the one common link in bringing the team together and ensuring that team objectives are successfully met.

Most traditional teams come together initially via a face-to-face kick-off meeting, where they get to know each other and agree on their "team charter". For the best results, this should still be done for all virtual teams as people tend to build trust faster once they have met their teammates. It is far more comfortable to meet virtually when you already know the person involved compared to dealing with just a faceless voice at the other end of a telephone call. This forming stage often continues beyond the initial formal meeting with the session extending to a team dinner or sociable drinks.

However, it is not always possible to bring the team together for an initial meeting, and this has to be carried out via other means. Where this is conducted remotely, for example, by means of a conference call, video conference, or e-meeting, the team leader should ensure that each team member is involved and gets an opportunity to introduce him/herself.

Team members should be encouraged to provide profile information in advance of the meeting, covering not only their contact details and skills, but also some personal facts and interests. Contact details should also include a photograph – putting a face to a voice often helps get over the problem of speaking to someone who you have never met.

It is recommended that, even if the team members only meet virtually, the team leader makes every effort to meet the team members face-to-face when first enrolling them into the team.

LEADING A VIRTUAL TEAM

When participating in a virtual team, it is essential that the team members get the opportunity to communicate and share ideas on a regular basis. Not only does the team leader need to be in regular contact with each team member to understand how they are performing, but the team members need to be proactively in regular contact with each other.

One advantage that team members have when they work in the same location is the opportunity of meeting informally over lunch or coffee, encouraging them to share information, report on progress and discuss problems, issues, and so forth. As this is not an option for a virtual team, communication has to be more formal and regularly scheduled. Processes need to be put in place to define the different communication methods and how and when to use them.

During formal team meetings, the team leader should ensure that each participant in the call reports on their progress. With large teams, this may mean splitting the team down into smaller, more manageable subgroups. A regular meeting schedule involving everyone at some level ensures that team members do not become isolated. This is a good forum at which to identify and share "quick wins" with team members to keep the momentum going. In addition to the formal meetings, the team leader should ensure that he/she has regular contact with individuals and subgroups outside the meeting schedule.

TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGY

A wide range of tools and technologies exist to support virtual teams. The level of functionality and sophistication of the tool set available to individual team members, irrespective of their location, is increasing rapidly, allowing them to

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