

Leading Virtual Teams

Carroll Thatcher, CFM, IFMA Fellow
Guy Thatcher, CMC, IFMA Fellow

Carroll Thatcher Planning Group Inc.
www.thatcherplanning.com

Humans work better in teams. It is part of our ancient behaviour, from the days of hunting and gathering hundreds of thousands of years ago. There is often a synergy that is created by the interplay of people's intellects and activities that creates a solution better than any single team member could have discovered on their own.

There is a view that teams are successful based mostly on how well they communicate. While communication is a key part of team success, it is not the only important part of it. The factor on which all successful teams succeed or founder is trust. Teams that work together physically learn about each other's strengths and weaknesses by observation over time. It becomes a matter of what people do, not what they say, that allows each team member to decide how much trust to place in the other members of the team.

That trust is built up by all kinds of communication, most of which is non-verbal. In fact, over 90 percent of the communication is not in the words we use, but rather in how we speak, the sounds we make and the body language that we use. Clearly, any method of communication that reduces the ability of people to send and receive non-verbal clues also reduces the ability to communicate effectively. If you have been wondering why email gets us in trouble so quickly, consider that the words we use – what we see in email – is less than ten percent of our communication potential.

Virtual teams, unlike physical teams, are geographically dispersed and therefore do not provide as many opportunities for non-verbal communication. The challenge is to use technology, leadership techniques, and team protocols to provide alternate means of building trust.

Characteristics of teams

What makes a team ... any team? Whether the team is all in the same meeting room or virtual, team members need to have a common purpose, organization, a plan, communication skills, inter-personal skills and leadership.

And what makes any team, physical or virtual, work?

- Clarity of purpose – the reason that the team has been created must be clear to each member of the team.
- Appropriate mix of skills – the mix of skills depends on the goal to be achieved.

- Available time and energy – team members must have sufficient available time to be able to make a commitment to the aims of the team and must be healthy enough to be able to meet their commitment.
- Willingness to support team goals – team members who are clear about the goals and are excited about them are likely to be very supportive of the team.
- Willingness to meet deadlines – meeting deadlines is a function of clarity of purpose, willingness to support team goals and available time and energy.
- Ability to resolve conflict – one advantage of a team is the synergy that can be created by a group of people with different views and skills. Strong team members are likely to hold strong views, which may conflict with views of other team members.
- Leadership – leadership is required to guide the team to maintain its purpose, allow creative conflict to happen, resolve conflicts and meet the deadlines with the expected results.
- Trust – trust is defined as “the willingness to be vulnerable, based on expectations about the actions of others¹”. There are two components to trust as defined here. One is the willingness to expose oneself. The other is the expectation about other’s actions.

How virtual teams differ from physical teams

How does a virtual team differ from a physical team? A virtual team is a group of people working together who are geographically dispersed and rely on mediated (not face-to-face) communication to produce a result.

Clearly, there are huge advantages to working in virtual teams:

- There is the potential for greater access to skills, since distance is no barrier
- Barriers to trust and understanding such as race, age, gender, appearance are not as distracting
- It is less expensive, since travel costs will be lower and travel time will be reduced
- The ability to reach and communicate decisions may be faster.

And there are some concerns:

- Little or no face-time
- Less body language
- Each communication method has its unique limitations
- There is greater opportunity for misunderstanding
- There is less opportunity to recognize and correct misunderstandings.

The effect of technology on working in teams

Virtual teams are as old as recorded history. Every time a nation or city-state sent out a team of explorers, they were operating as a virtual team. Every communication between the “home” authority and the distant team, whether by letter, despatch or verbal message carrier was part of the reliance on mediated

¹ Zand, Dale E., “Trust and Managerial Problem Solving”, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 17, No. 2 (June 1972), pp 229-239

communication to attempt to keep the mission on track and to keep the home authority apprised of the events.

What has changed in the recent past is the capability of technology to support the ability of the virtual team to communicate in real time and with many more methods than reliance on written communication.

Another change, based on the technology, is the rapid move away from the idea of workplace as somewhere you go to work towards the idea of work as something you do, for an agreed reward. The place of work is becoming wherever the worker and the organization agree that it is. It can be home - classic telecommuting, somewhere else in the same building as before, somewhere else on campus, in a Starbucks, or mobile - in trains, planes and automobiles.

As more and more work is done in virtual teams, it becomes important for us to understand better how virtual teams work and what advantages and limitations there are in the available technologies.

Technology available to virtual teams

Four major methods of virtual communication are:

- Video conferencing
- Audio conferencing
- Webcam-based communication
- Computer-mediated communication (neither video nor audio) – email is the most common example.

Classic video conferencing is less social and more task-oriented than face-to-face. There can be problems with taking turns and in determining who is actually speaking. There can be lower confidence in judgment and less participation. When there are groups who are physically together in remote locations, a “we versus them” attitude can develop. People tend to trust the judgment of the people they are with more than of those who are remote. There is less interruption and less overt conflict, but it takes longer to develop trust and the level of trust is fragile. Surprisingly, the audio quality is more important than the video quality.

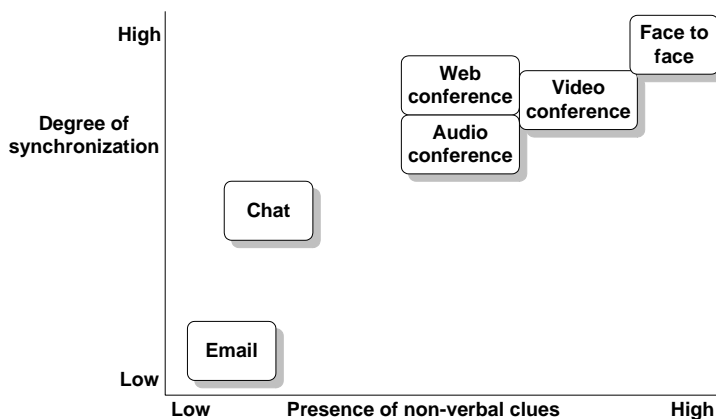
Audio conferencing, sometimes with groups in conference rooms, sometimes with each person on their own phone, shares some limitations with video conferencing. There are problems with who is speaking and with taking turns, since the participants do not get most of the non-verbal signals. There is less interruption and less overt conflict, but lower confidence in other people’s judgment. With audio-conferencing, lying is easier to detect. Apparently, we can learn to lie with a straight face, but our voices give us away.

More recently, webcam communication, based on the ubiquitous PC, creates the ability to participate in the personal video conference. Webcam users spend more time seeking common ground, offer more information and provide more listener feedback. This method is quite effective for those already acquainted and “teamed.”

Computer-mediated communication is the least effective for understanding – less than 10 percent of the full message gets across. Computer-mediated teams have greater equality of participation, exhibit lower inhibition, have few non-text clues, have difficulty reaching consensus and are more likely to be polarized. That is why email communication so often leads to “flaming” – conflict escalated rapidly as people, unable to comprehend what the other people are feeling or signalling non-verbally, misinterpret what they read as being the total message. We are programmed to send and receive body language, even when it cannot possibly work – we have all seen people on telephones gesticulating as they speak, even though the party on the other end can’t see them.

Anonymity, sometimes available in computer-mediated discussions, reduces fear about performance, reduces inhibition and pressure to conform and produces more novel approaches in brainstorming. It also allows users to review comments more objectively, diffuses individual responsibility and may result in less individual effort.

The diagram below, from the RAND Corporation, shows how the various virtual communication methods relate to face-to-face in two characteristics; the degree of synchronization (the highest synchronization is face-to-face, in which both parties communicate in real time) and the presence of non-verbal clues. Note the polarity of face-to-face versus email. That is why, when you receive an email that upsets you, do not respond with a testy email. Talk to, or better yet, arrange to meet with the other person to resolve the potential conflict. You, too, need to have your non-verbal clues responded to.



Leading a virtual team

What makes a good distance leader? Cynthia Froggatt identifies four characteristics, from her article *Leading From a Distance*², published in 2003. Good distance leaders:

- Use the geographical distribution to its greatest advantage – give people the mobility tools they need to let them be where they need to be for greatest productivity and personal satisfaction

² You can download a complimentary copy from www.leadingfromadistance.com.

- Minimize the perceived distance between people – a sound protocol will help keep people from feeling isolated
- Make strategic use of face-to-face interaction - when you have to physically be somewhere, make the best use of your time. Talk to all the important people in that place while you are there.
- Rewards results, not-face time - the dedicated worker is not the one who is always there. The dedicated worker is the one who is delivering what the organization needs, and takes care of themselves at the same time.

Building trust through a team protocol

What every team, not just a virtual team, needs, is an effective set of agreed rules, or protocol, within which to operate. The protocol sets down the rules of engagement, so that misunderstanding can be prevented or minimized. The rules need to be specific. For example, the protocol may call for any message to be responded to “promptly.” What is one person’s “promptly” may be another’s “too little, too late.” What is needed is a statement that messages will be responded to within a fixed number of days, or hours or minutes. Clarity will help innocent misunderstandings from turning into open conflict.

The protocol needs to include:

- The objective – the reason for the team’s existence
- Team membership – who is in the team and what skills or experience does each member bring?
- Roles – what role does each person have to play to support the team’s common objective?
- Schedule - what has to happen, and by when? What are the milestones?
- Communication – what is the normal method of communication? When it will not suffice, what other methods will be used?
- How will decisions be made – does the group have to come to consensus, is it a majority vote, does the leader decide or is there some other method for reaching a decision? Ensure your preferred method cannot result in stalemate.
- How conflict will be resolved – think of the protocol as a team contract. Every well-written contract includes a method for handling conflict or ending the contract.
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- When developing your protocol, consider these technical issues:
- If you are thinking about recording the communication, is it allowed, recommended, required or forbidden under the agreed protocol?
- How will you manage security of communication? What level of security do you need, and what level of security is available with the technical tools that you are considering?
- The lowest common denominator of electronic capability of all the participants is the highest level of sophistication that you can use. If you need more technical capability, ensure that every member has the same.

Resources available

There are hundreds of technical software packages that support virtual teams and many, many websites that are available for the interested party. Here is one website – we are not endorsing it, just using it as an example - that offers a wealth of information about video and web-conferencing, collaborative work environments and more: www.thinkofit.com

At this website, http://www.facilitate.com/resources/files/RAND_Research2004.pdf, you can read and download free a 130-page paper “Challenges in Virtual Collaboration,” published by the RAND Corporation, from which some of the ideas in this paper are derived.

In conclusion, understanding the tools and the rules for the effective operation of virtual teams will help all of us, whether leading or participating in a virtual team, to work more comfortably and productively with others as the future of work unfurls before us.