Effective Communications in a Virtual Team

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In the ever divergent global business market, virtual teams are emerging as an important resource for organisations, and can save on resources such as time, travel and accommodation costs.

In this article Carlo Stasi, OU MBA, explores the importance of communications within virtual teams to ensure continued success for the teams and their projects.

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1. Teams, Virtual Teams, and Global Teams

“A team is a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems, and who manage their relationship across organizational boundaries.” (Cohen et al., 1997).

“[Virtual teams are] groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organizational tasks. […]” The global team […] draws members that work and live in different countries and are culturally diverse. (Powell et al., 2004).

“The fundamentals of global team success aren’t very different from the practices that work for domestic work teams. But there are more variables. Overlay cultural behavior and expectations on the roles of communication, team leadership and group dynamics, and you immediately understand. Moreover, there are logistics to overcome: challenges inherent in working in different time zones, lots of travel, and busy conflicting schedules” (Soomon, 1995).

2. The Communication Challenge

For virtual teams to work effectively, nothing is more essential than communication. Leaders of virtual teams must manage communication with a view to fostering cohesion, ensure that team members get evidence of effective communication, take any opportunities to enhance a sense of belonging, and convey the feeling they work in a supportive environment. Weak communication would make the virtual team prone to “low individual commitment, role overload, role ambiguity, absenteeism, and social loafing” (Janvernpaa & Leidner, 1999).

2.1 Lack of non-verbal communication

Virtual teams work in a communication technology-mediated environment, which allows face-to-face meetings only to a limited extent, if at all.

Verbal communication conveys just a small part of the meaning, while the rest is communicated by actions such as posture, waving, facial expressions (‘body language’) as well as tone, voice emphasis, pauses, and all the factors that make communication a complex social process. Therefore virtual team members need to find out ways to express what in a “real” environment is expressed non-verbally. Common solutions are emoticons in electronic messages, taking extra care in wording messages to mitigate the risk of misunderstandings, consideration of the speed with which a response is sent, and so forth.

If not properly managed, the loss of information due to lack of non-verbal communication can lead to frustration, misunderstandings and eventually even generate conflict among team members (Kaiser et al., 2000).

2.2 Tight deadlines, stereotypes, and trust

When group members are not given enough time to mature and develop as a team, they naturally tend to rely on stereotypical images of their interlocutors. It can get worse if the group is deliberately given too a short time span for virtual team building, in the flawed assumption that electronic communication can speed up or even replace most steps of a social process.

Stereotypical images of the interlocutors can be based on geographical origin, gender, age, or command of the working language. When this happens “members import expectations of trust from other settings with which they are familiar” (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). On a more negative note, it
is possible that “they will tend to filter information through their inherent cultural biases, thereby giving rise to a potentially broad range of misinterpretations or distortions” (Kayworth and Leidner, 2002).

The adoption of stereotypical impressions about the other members of the team has disruptive effects on building trust (Markus, 2004). This can more easily occur when the virtual environment causes loss or distortion of information related to members’ individual traits or level of expertise, ending up in a high “level of anonymity” (Kayworth and Leidner, 2002).

3. Are Virtual Teams worthy?

Early literature on virtual teams tends to consider them as a one-off exercise with limited duration, set up to accomplish a specific mission, whose members never worked together before and they carry out the activities knowing that they will never team up again.

In reality, despite their limitations, virtual teams are increasingly adopted as an organisational solution to address flexibility needs, reduce internal costs, achieve a matrix-shaped organization of work and decision processes, improve the internal exchange of know-how, increase the efficiency of networks, and enhance competitive advantage.

With regard to behavioural aspects, research documents that well managed virtual teams have great potential for creating the condition for individuals to feel motivated to participate; facilitating cultural exchange; identifying creative solutions to longstanding problems; augmenting participants’ satisfaction; encouraging cross-fertilization among different management styles, which leads to high-quality group decision making and mediated resolution of conflicts.

4. Your 6-piece toolkit

4.1 Establish clear team structure and shared norms

Almost invariably, the disadvantages of virtual teams come from ambiguity: team members are subject to uncertainty about their interlocutors, tasks sharing, responsibilities, and about the level of understanding of their achievements by the other members of the team.

Therefore the virtual team leader should: establish clear internal communication rules; explore details of coordination issues and define guidelines to be agreed with the team; and avoid any ambiguities on roles and responsibilities. Finally, the virtual team manager should ensure that team members not only understand their individual tasks and objectives, but are also perfectly acquainted with those of the other members’.

With clear team structure and agreed norms, it is likely that individuals spontaneously adjust themselves to other team members’ strengths and weaknesses.

4.2 Fight uncertainty

Trust is key to virtual team’s success since it mitigates uncertainty. Trust makes people reduce their risk aversion about elements over which they have no control, for instance the possibility that other team members perform below expectations.

At the inception of the virtual team’s life, team members’ expectations are highest. At this stage, individuals build initial confidence about the team’s potential through acting proactively and creatively with faith that the team can work out any problems. Research shows that - if there are no serious stereotype problems - “when [virtual team members] don’t have enough time to slowly build trust, [they] assume that others are trustworthy and begin working as if trust were already in place while
seeking confirming or disconfirming evidence throughout the duration of the project” (Powell et al., 2004).

This is a key asset for virtual team leaders. They should try not to disappoint expectations, and possibly make the most of such early enthusiasm, by encouraging individuals engage in “an open and thoughtful exchange of messages at the beginning of the team's existence” (Jarvenpaa et. al., 1999).

4.3 Run face-to-face (f2f) meetings on a regular basis

In the early stages of the virtual team, f2f meetings help people understand tasks and responsibilities, clarify project definition, and avoid stereotypical images. Regular f2f meetings are key to build and maintain team spirit, increase effectiveness of electronic communication, and encourage people to resist the temptation to give up when lack of direct contact takes its toll.

4.4 Encourage social communication

Because technology-mediated communication filters non-verbal messages, the virtual team leader should encourage team members to engage in social communication by exchanging information, comments, opinions and feelings not necessarily related to work tasks. Social communication also functions to partially replace non-verbal cues.

F2f meetings can contribute to improve social communication if informal conversations are included in the programme of the day. When back to a fully virtual environment, the virtual team leader might want to organize “regular chat sessions with all team members present and using humour to lighten moods” (Powell et al., 2004).

4.5 Build up a common language

Virtual teams can develop their own communication codes and rules, which are likely to make up for some of the ambiguities of non-verbal communication - for instance when “interpreting the meaning of silence or non-reply by others” (Crampton, 2001).

Common language (i.e. common vocabulary and communication structures, dialogue modalities/habits, etc.) can help reduce the risk of misinterpretation, uncertainty and frustration. Ideally the team leader should plan a number of virtual brainstorming sessions without expecting instant results, just aiming to build up a shared language.

4.6 Mitigate the negative effects of cultural differences

Research shows that cultural differences influence coordination and effective communication in virtual teams. Even “subtler differences among team members from different regions of the same country may be enough to negatively impact a virtual team” (Powell et al., 2004). Individuals’ experience working in multicultural environments may influence their openness to cultural differences and willingness to explore different behaviours with a view to discover commonalities and build trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

The good news is that technology-mediated communication can mitigate the negative effects of cultural differences by acting like a filter, thus increasing “the perceived similarity among members” (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999): different dressing styles, and body language can still play a role in video conferencing, but are completely irrelevant in written communication.
5. Taking Stock

The quality of communication ultimately depends on the level of response, which is crucial for building trust in virtual teams. In this context, “a response is an endorsement that another person is willing to take the risk of interpreting the first person’s message and, if necessary, supplying the missing elements to make it understandable” (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

Therefore, the virtual team members should commit to response and feedback. If necessary, the virtual team leader can establish internal communication rules in order to ensure that no initiative is left without response, and no contribution without feedback. In doing so, the team leader should make it clear that it “is not the quantity, but the quality and predictability of their communication that is most critical to the effective functioning of the team” (Powell et al., 2004).
8. References


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