The Effectiveness of Team Building and Communications in Virtual Team

Team 4
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I.   Abstract

The effectiveness of team building and communications via a virtual team will be examined.

II.   Introduction

Team 3, R.A.M.S, has embarked in the challenge of being a virtual team during this school term while completing our ETM 522 team project. In order to gain first-hand experience with team building and communication effectiveness, we will partake in a case study, which includes all project related communications taking place over the various communications tools available. Literary research and a survey on virtual teams will be used as supplemental information to determi=ne the effectiveness of communications and team building.

III.   Literary Review

i.   Team Communication

The most important aspect of a team is how they communicate. Without proper communication a team is doomed to fail. Virtual teams face a unique problem in that communication is not always done in a face-to-face manner. When a group can meet in person an individual can use non-verbal signs from team members to determine if they are being understood [1]. This can make it hard to get across your message and "sell" an idea to team members.

A study was done to determine the communication breakdowns in global virtual teams. Global virtual teams are teams that are comprised of people from different regions, ethnicities, and nationalities. The study found that global virtual teams tend to communicate poorly in regards to cross-cultural differences [2]. The study also found that these global virtual teams did not utilize the cultural differences to their advantage when completing their goal [2]. This is a unique problem to global teams. However, the basic fundamentals of team building are still valid and must be managed carefully by team leaders and/or managers [2].

Technology has aided in communication for global teams. The tools that are now available make virtual teams more appropriate than before. The technology that is available is helping bridge the gap between face-to-face and virtual to help diminish the challenges faced in an ever-quickening pace to complete projects.

ii.   Communication Tools

Communication is essential for a virtual team. Therefore, having the right collaboration tools and strategies can help make virtual team meetings work successfully. In addition, conducting meeting via the virtual world save on costs of travel and time resources. The technological advancements in electronics have increased the number of communication tools available for use by virtual teams. Some are listed below:

Email, which is short for electronic mail, is commonly used to send digital messages electronically. Emails can include plain text, images, and attachments. Many of the email services provide this for free. In addition, it can be accessed through other means of technology other than a computer. Smart phones can be used to access email from any location that there is cellular service.

Instant Messaging also known as IM allows users to communicate immediately via a chat session.

Telephone or teleconferencing provides a way to communicate through conversation. Be it a cellular phone, landline, or Internet connection. Again, smart phones allow a user to join conversations while on the go. Also, technology has given this device the ability to collaborate online.

Web Conferencing is a service that allows real time communications through the Internet, from one sender to many receivers (usually located in various physical locations). Attendees are connected by using VoIP (voice over Internet protocol), which allows real-time streaming of audio and video. There are a vast number of Web conferencing programs available. Wikipedia has a great comparison chart that shows various web conferencing features available through 60+ different services [3].

There are many advantages that web conferencing provides online. It allows teams to communicate much easier than in the past. Sharing documents comes with ease, because teams can view the same documents or presentations that are being discussed. Everyone is on the same page looking at the same material. This helps keep everyone in sync with each other all in real-time. Another advantage that online collaboration provides is that it has "a variety of project tracking capabilities that make it easy for team members to see the evolution of a project from day one; from tracking who made the latest changes to a document, to how the document was before the changes, to tagging a colleague to review the document, it's never been easier to manage a project" [4]. Virtual teams have the opportunity to meet face-to-face via webcasts & webinars. Through these means audio and visual broadcasting provides a platform for teams to meet together in spite of the logistics of the team members. Web conferencing tools can be used for groups that are large or small. Meetings can be established instantly, plus one does not have to deal with the problem of finding a conference or meeting room to hold the meeting. Again, time and money is saved because travel time and expenses has been eliminated or reduced.

Some disadvantages of the Emails and Instant messages are that the content can be misconstrued, especially if emotions are involved. When messages are sent, albeit, through Email, IM, or telephone and ones' body language cannot be observed there is room for misinterpretation. Therefore, it is always wise to clarify a message if there is any doubt that it can be taken in the wrong context. Also, when teams only meet via electronic communications there is a lack of team building. So a lack of trust may be present within the team. Social networking tools can help alleviate this issue. Applications such as, "Facebook®, Twitter®, or LinkedIn® can be used to connect with team members to give an insight into their personality, home life, and interests." [5]

iii.   Challenges

Throughout time teams have had challenges they must overcome in order to become an effective working team. Considering the number of challenges faced by teams that work face-to-face on a daily basis, it is understandable that virtual teams would have more challenges to overcome due to the distance involved. Below are some of the common challenges that are faced by virtual teams.

a. Identity

The way in which an individual's self-perception is shaped is by their personal, social and organizational identities [6]. In essence the groups in which they belong and interact with affect one's social identity. George Herbert Mead [7], one of the most famous researchers of social identity, believes that it is this organizing of others' attitudes that in the form of organized social or group attitudes shapes an individual's own identity.

[8] describes that identity plays a critical role in communication among team members but in the virtual team the identity of a person can be uncertain. With the use of technology people can have many personas that lead to this ambiguity. Furthermore, [6] states that the most important challenge among virtual teams is the decreasing amount or lack of face-to-face interaction. Due to this lack of face-to-face interaction virtual teams are lacking the physical cues allowing members to establish informal rules in terms of tolerances of effort, cost, schedule and errors [9]. This increases the chance of miscommunication and can lead to nonconformance within the team. This increased miscommunication leads into the next challenge of working in virtual teams, that challenge being trust within the team.

b. Trust

Trust is a pivotal factor in how people interact with others. In the sense of teams, trust is a physiological state that is shared by the members of the team and is characterized by the acceptance of risk and vulnerability [10]. Furthermore, within teams there is a sense of collective trust, which [11], [12] describe as the belief that is shared by all members of the team that each member of the team will fulfill their commitments and not take opportunities to take advantage of the team.

Members of an effective team need to have a work environment that they consider safe. This environment is needs so each member of the team can establish the reciprocal trust with others on the team so the risk of interdependence can be taken [10]. That is to say, members of the teams are willing to express their lack of knowledge in an area to the team without repercussions.

The formation and maintenance of trust in temporary teams depends more on cognitive foundations rather than affective foundations [10], [13]. Cognitive foundations being those of: reliability, integrity, competency and responsibility. Affective foundations rely on the emotional and social aspects of interaction amongst team members, which according to [14] is difficult to experience in a virtual construct. The geographical distance of a team member can lead to a lack of trust because of different cultures, not knowing the abilities of the people working in the team and the overall complexity of trying to get all members to meet at the same time. Trust plays a major role within geographically separated virtual teams from allowing that distance to create psychological distance [15].

IV.   Survey Result

As part of this research report a survey was developed and distributed to a sample of 19 people of varying backgrounds. The goal of the survey was to gain an understanding of how the impact of working in a virtual team impacted the effectiveness of the tasks completed by these teams. Of the 19 respondents one had not participated in a virtual team and subsequently did not answer the questions that followed.
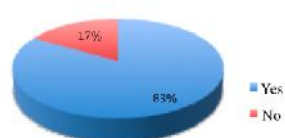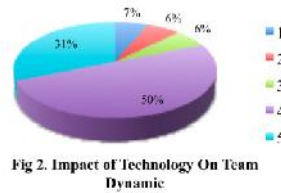
Fig 1. Percentage Use of Technology

Fig 2. Impact of Technology On Team Dynamic

Fig 3. Satisfaction of Working in a Virtual Team

Figures 1 and 2 show the percentage of respondents who have used virtual technology as part of the team dynamic and how much of an impact it played in this dynamic. The overwhelming majority believed that using technology has part of the team dynamic played an impact. Figure 3 represents the breakdown of how each individual respondent rated their satisfaction with working in a virtual team.

As part of the survey respondents were asked to document what they felt were some of the difficulties with working in a virtual team. Most of the respondents noted issues that relate to trust and the lack of interpersonal interactions. One respondent noted, "interpersonal interactions are often improved with improved relationships, and those can be difficult to foster a genuine way in a virtual capacity." Other issues to note were that of time zones and schedule in general. These respondents felt that the difficulty in scheduling of team meetings was also hampered by the lack of effective communication in their teams.

Fig 4. Effectiveness of Virtual Team in Completing Task

Finally, the survey asked each respondent how the would rank the effectiveness of their current or past involvement in a virtual team. Figure 4 shows that the majority of the respondent felt that each of their experiences within a virtual team was effective at completing the task at hand.

V. Case Study

This case study explores collaboration in a virtual team environment for four-team members as a part of a team project in communications and team building class at Portland State University. The R.A.M.S team had 11 weeks to put together the team report, team progress report, and two class ownership presentations without benefit of a face-to-face meeting. All meetings were to be held through online collaboration, via Google Hangout and emails. If needed teleconferences could be set up. This case study describes the experiences of the R.A.M.S team and provides useful lessons on collaboration in a virtual environment.

The team had a narrowly focused task, and a tight deadline (11 weeks). The four-member R.A.M.S team was composed of three full time employees and one full time student. The team

agreed to meet once a week and spend about two hours a week outside of their regular jobs to work on the project.

In the first week meeting, the members met to develop a conceptual outline for the team final project as well as the class ownership. The team agreed on showing high commitment to the success of the project. Early on in the project, the member who had volunteered to lead the team began clustering various tasks into groups of work; the clustered work then were further explained in a shared word document via Google drive.

Distributing the tasks and then monitoring the resulting progress became a coordinating leadership role in the team, which was essential to effective team management. Team members agreed that leadership actions were distributed, even though, Sean was elected as the team leader. The team was assigned to create a high-quality team charter, which was agreed upon and executed to improve communication among team members in regards of specifications of the team mission, roles of individual team members, authority and boundaries of the team and its members.

All the members in the R.A.M.S team show an attitude of respect for professional colleagues, which in turn positively affected the virtual experience for all members. Each had an opportunity to contribute his or her own special interests and talents, and each trusted that others would see their portion of the work toward the completion of the project. Team members agreed to do high-quality individual work then brought it back to the team for discussion.

Good communication skills, including both written and oral, is an important component of any successful virtual workgroup. From the beginning, the team had agreed that in order to achieve high quality and efficient outcomes, we need proper communication. As a virtual team, we are interested in the ability of team members to communicate effectively using computer communication technologies. The teams decided to perform their tasks using emails, Google drive for documentation, and Google hangout for meetings.

Each team member's commitment to the task and to the other members functioned to work together as a whole and keep up a high level of intensity by keep a short period between virtual meetings or E-mail exchanges. E-mails were characterized as a high priority emails. The team meetings through Google hangout were planned well in advance for scheduling purposes. During the call, the formal team leader kept notes on actions agreed upon during the call, placing them right into the text of the notes and schedule minutes document. Within minutes after completion of the team meeting, the team leader upload the final copy of the meeting minutes to Google drive with the actions agreed upon highlighted. This allowed anyone who missed a call to be quickly updated.

Overall, Individual attributes skills and abilities, shared commitment, and desire to contribute to achieve the team requirements were essential to accomplish virtual collaboration contributed heavily to successful task completion. Pre-planned and electronically distributed agendas with action items, and a lively and active interchange of E-mails were processes that enabled the team to fulfill the class requirements successfully. These enabling protocols, however, were only mechanical processes. Further more the energizing and shared leadership, a role that was shared by several team members, within the team were credited with successful completion of the team's task. Finally, working with respected colleagues was a key factor in this case study.

VI.   Discussion and Recommendation

There is a wide variety of communication tools available due to the vast advancements in technological communication electronics. The key element is to leverage the right tools for the virtual project team in order to foster effective communication. A project manager or team leader should help foster virtual team building by establishing activities where the team members can get to know each other both professionally and personally. Networking through social media sites is an example of informal interactions that can strengthen team bonding. Another useful tip is to minimize multitasking during meetings in order to concentrate on the meeting at hand. By doing so, this can help the team create trust with one another. The roles of virtual teams should be clearly defined, as well as, processes and tasks. Clarity on who does what for the team will be helpful in alignment of individual work and interdependent tasks towards the team's milestones and goal. A team that has a shared vision & commitment to a common purpose can be an effective team. Furthermore, the team leader role can be shared among the team members, which helps promote team building. Also, be conscious about the time zones when scheduling meetings. Sensitivity to this factor is appreciated and can increase participation. It is important to schedule team communication on a regular basis to keep track of progress and touch base with teammates.

VII.   Conclusion

Through literary research, surveys, and personal experience we were able to determine that virtual team can be effective. However, it can be difficult for a virtual team to become a high performing team. The critical aspect to a virtual teams success is the teams ability to decide on a common goal and direction and the team members commitment to that goal. This buy in can be difficult to achieve if the team is not able to have a face-to-face meeting. These obstacles can be overcome but they must be recognized during the inception of a virtual team and properly accounted for and managed.

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