



Decision-Making in Multicultural Virtual Team

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Abstract

The advances in virtual collaborative technology have helped many companies to create the virtual team with multiple team members from different geographies and cultures to solve company's big issues. Virtual team has many benefits such as reducing cost, allocating companies' resources especially labors and talents more efficient, providing flexible schedule to employees, and improving employee's health. However, virtual teams also face many different issues. This paper focuses on the challenges in decision-making process and proposes solutions to these challenges. These solutions are based on our team members' observation and experience to help virtual teams make decisions more effectively.

Introduction

As many companies expand globally, the need to have the effective decision making process is critical to team performance effectiveness. The advances in virtual collaborative technology have helped these companies to create the virtual team with multiples team members from different geographies and cultures to tackle big projects while keeping the cost and time down from reducing face-to-face meeting and expensive business trip. However, decision-making process in virtual team faces many challenges. Team members' engagement in meeting to reach final decision is the first challenge. Moreover, due to distance and time zone differences, it is difficult to coordinate group efforts or have meaningful discussion between team members. The lack of common languages and culture could also be the obstacle for virtual team to become effectiveness in making decision. Another challenge that virtual team has to face is lacking influence over team members due to the organizational hierarchy or different geography. This research paper is to explore and exam these challenges using literature research and personal experience to provide the recommendations to help virtual teams reach the highest-level efficiency in decision-making process.

Literature Review

Virtual Team Definition

The concept of a “team” is described as a group of individuals with complementary skills who are committed to achieve a common purposes and goals. A virtual team is a group of individuals who work across time, location, and organizational boundaries using modern technologies for communication to cover a wide range of activities, which will help to achieve the goals and proposes of the project.[OTHER DIFINITIONS??? REFERENCES]

Why Virtual Teams?

- Efficient use of time:

Maintain an accurate record of progress, which will most likely help getting the job done on time and under budget. Also, if you use resources in other countries or other locations with different time zone, your company will never sleep [1]. The global workday is 24 vs. 8 hours which allowing you to move twice as fast and get the job done in a fast and efficient way.

- Improved Communication:

Influence and force you to deliver your thoughts and communicate clearly which will reduce the vague and unclear instaurations. If you are stuck somewhere, you can easily go back and read through the instruction. Communication process is designed in a way that allows you to save and record discussions for later reference [1].

- Efficient work environment

Members of a virtual team are less tending to feel isolated in the work environment and more motivated because they feel and know that they are a part of the accomplishment. When you hire a member on the Virtual Teams, you hire for the skills you need, not just what's locally available. Virtual team allows you to hire experienced employees; those that don't want to relocate or do a long commute to your office. Also, team members located in different states or countries increase the diversity of your team, which will help the team to think out of the box when they face any problem and find the efficient solution to problem.

- Flexible Scheduling

Virtual Teams provide the ability to spend time with the family and pickup the children from school in the middle of the day. Virtual Teams also enable employees take a refreshing nap, break, or work after the family has gone to sleep. Also, working in a virtual team can improve the quality of life by enabling you to live and work where you want which give countless of benefits on your mood and performance.

- Improved Health

Developing a schedule time to exercise gets easier when you work at home. Going for a quick run to think through a problem becomes easier. Working at home can give your employees the option to make healthier food. They can often take their laptops into the dining room, so they can cook and work at the same time [1].

Current Virtual Team Statistics

- Decision-making is more difficult on virtual teams than on conventional teams (69%) [2].
- The top five challenges faced during virtual team meetings were insufficient time to build relationships (90%), speed of decision making (80%), different leadership styles (77%), method of decision making (76%), and colleagues who do not participate (75%). [2]
- The absence of clear leadership and inability to make decisions were concerns among some respondents. They believed that more attention had to be devoted to managing the progress of virtual teams and planning ahead to achieve a desirable result [3].

Practices of Effective Virtual Leaders

It is obviously that team leader is one of the vital factors in leading and developing virtual team to get the most benefits for companies. University of North Carolina professors Ben Rosen and Arvind Malhotra and University of Southern California professor Ann Majchrzax studied virtual teams and found that effective virtual team leaders will execute these activities [4]: 1) Establish and maintain trust through the use of communication technology, 2) Ensure that diversity on the team is understood, appreciated and leveraged, 3) Manage virtual work-cycles and meetings, 4) Enhance external visibility of the team and its mentors, 5) Ensure that individuals benefit from participation on the virtual team.

Virtual Team Challenges in Decision Making and Potential Solutions

In this study, based on literature research, observation, and personal experience, below are major challenges for virtual teams in decision-making process. Following each challenge, the recommendation is also proposed.

First, wrong method of or not clear communication will lead to wasting time and effort in making decisions especially in the meetings. These are some recommendations for effective virtual meetings to easily get the final decision [2]:

- Communicate clearly and slowly.
- Don't interject.
- Listen carefully to comprehend.
- Speak as though distant members are in the room.
- Don't text message during meetings.
- Set agendas for meetings and send them out beforehand.
- Leave time for relationship building.
- Well prepared documents before meetings:
 - Clear meeting objectives
 - Issues to be solved
 - Recommended solutions/approaches
- Confirm to all the members in the meeting about tasks assignments at the end of the meeting. Generate details meeting minutes (tasks assignments with member name, deadline, etc. ...)
- States difficulties in previous virtual team meetings: method of communication, time, etc. So that team members or leaders can find out solutions to improve the quality of the next meeting and commit to follow these solutions.

Second, team members' engagement in meeting is vital to reach final decision [5]. Most virtual team meeting is conducted over telephone conference. During the meeting, many team members tend to not pay attention or multitasking. When decision has to be made, it is very likely that many people do not understand the detail scope of work, which can cause making the wrong decision. Many team members may also request to repeat the subject again, which is wasting everyone time. For example, at Intel, many team members involve in many projects in the same time. There is a time that one project meeting overlap with another. Team members call in to one conference meeting while instant messaging in another. This causes team members unable to focus on either meetings to make the meaningful decision. To address this issue, ground rule and boundary conditions for each meeting must be set and followed. Each team member is only required to attend one meeting at the time base on priority. In the meeting, team members are not allowed to do other tasks but focusing on the meeting

discussion. Detailed meeting agenda must be sent ahead of time especially key decisions that will be discussed and voted during the upcoming meeting. Also, any important decision must be writing down in scope document or the white paper with key stakeholders as the sponsors.

Third, it is difficult to coordinate group efforts or have meaningful discussion between team members due to distance and time zone differences. Team members will have difficult time to work together if assigned tasks are cross disciplines or required multiple people collaboration due to different locations and time zones. For a typical project, there are many tasks that required cross discipline collaboration. Since the time zone is different, it is very difficult to meet and work together. Therefore, each team member usually focuses on his or her scope of the work. When the team has to make decision, the final agreement is difficult to make since the lack of collaboration in cross-discipline scope results in poor recommendations, which would impact other team members' performances. In order to solve this issue, with any cross discipline scope of work, the expectation that each team member involves in decision making process must communicate to each other before the project meeting to address concerns and provide inputs to each other's scope of work. By the time coming to the meeting, everyone involved in any cross discipline tasks must agree on the recommendation for the overall project.

Fourth, lack of common languages and cultures could be an obstacle for virtual teams to become effectiveness in making decision. In many cultures, it is impolite to be aggressive or dominate the meeting. On the other hand, in many cultures, it is okay to do so. Therefore, during virtual meeting, only couple members are talking in entire meeting while others are just quietly listening. When decision has to be made, there is a high chance that not everyone agrees on the solution or does not want to disagree during the meeting. This results in bad decisions to be made, which would impact to overall project cost or performance. Sometimes, team members do not provide inputs during the meeting but notify the team leader their disagreement after the meeting. This would impact to the project overall schedule because another meeting needs to be setup for everyone can discuss the same matter again. Furthermore, language barrier is also the issue since it causes misunderstanding or prolongs team meeting time until final decision is made. For example, in the United States, when team leader assigns tasks, team members say "yes" as accepting the responsibility. For Japanese culture, team members say "yes" as knowing the task details but not necessary mean as acceptance. To resolve this issue, ground rules must be made. Everyone must provide inputs during the meeting. Team leaders will make sure all team members have a chance to address their opinion in each meeting. Any chance after the meeting in final decision must be communicated to entire team including detailed explanations. Every meeting is required to have a member to take meeting minutes. This meet minutes will serve as a contract between all team members, which includes all key decisions that made during the meeting. All new tasks and responsible members must be documented in the meeting minutes.

Fifth, lack of influence over team members is due to the organizational hierarchy or different geography. Virtual team includes specific individual from different geography that meet the requirement of the project tasks [6]. Most of team members may from different organization within the same company. Even team leader is assigned; he or she does not have authority to other team members. This causes very difficult to get work done on time or create boundary condition in decision-making process. For example, each team member has many projects in the same time. Most of the time, he or she will focus on project that assigned by his or her manager or organization. Virtual team's project tasks are usually treated as secondary, and this will cause delay in overall project schedule. The recommendation for this challenge is team leader must align with each team member's manager to gain support. Team leader also has to communicate to all managers regarding project's status and each team member's performance.

Sixth, team leaders play important roles in making virtual teams work effectively. The most challenging tasks for leaders of global/virtual teams is to know that their styles in making decision may be extremely embedded in the cultures that they come from. Therefore, these teams need very clear explanations of how decisions will be made, and the greatest team leader is the one who is eager to attempt diverse decision-making processes at dissimilar points in a project [7] [5]. Also, team leader roles are very important in contributing to build good team communication methods and make decisions. In any teams, whether relationships between team members are strong enough are reliant on team leaders. Indeed, strong team member relationships dependent to task-oriented communication [8]. This means that leaders must give virtual team members purpose to work together virtually in order to encourage thoughtful and subsequently durable relationships. Moreover, relationships are developed by problems solving and trust built by giving and receiving information [8]. Thus, leaders should empower relationships by starting with intensive task-related communications at a distance, and follow with face-to-face opportunities for team building before returning to distant locations for more work.

The points stated in the above paragraph are absolutely right for a member in our group, Yen, with her working experience. For example, in her previous job as an IT manager, she had a chance to work with a Thailand team remotely. Her company bought an Equity Trading system from a Thailand software company. Hence, Thailand developer and consultant teams had to work with her team in more than one year to complete the project, which is deploying and implementing the new Equity Trading System. At the beginning of the project, kick-off meeting, they were including team leaders and key team members in both Thailand and Vietnam had met face-to-face to get to know well each other. Through this meeting, both team members knew people in project organization chart as well as who needed to work closely with whom on what aspects. The kick-off meeting was hold at a resort in the seaside. They not only met but

also had such fun team building activities to play together. By this way, they all initiated pairs of working teams and had been developing strong relationships to the end of the project. This is true to relate to the statement that stated above that leaders should empower relationships by starting with intensive task-related communications at a distance, and follow with face-to-face opportunities for team building before returning to distant locations for more work. As a manager, she recognized that Vietnamese members had established strong relationships with Thailand team members through trouble shootings they had faced and solved during the projects. Indeed, most of the time, both teams had to communicate by emails, chatting, voice conferences every day. Furthermore, each person in each team not only knew well each other, but also they knew who he/she should to contact regarding to the task issues. However, as mentioned above, two members in a pair especially had more messages exchanged to each other than other members in the team due to their task-related assignments. Therefore, these pair relationships were stronger during the project time. This is true regarding to the point stated above those strong team member relationships dependent to task-oriented communication.

Conclusion

Due to financial miseries have happened recently, many organizations in the world have had to collect members of project teams from across countries and have them communicate virtually. Thanks to new collaboration technologies, time and money have been saved by having virtual teams in working places such as reducing travel and relocation costs, provide work/life balance and flexibility for employees

There are more global virtual teams today than ever before and the numbers of these virtual teams are growing quickly [7]. Hence, this paper is an our attempt which collects researches and team members experience to make it as a reference for who have concerns about challenges of working in virtual team and solutions to overcome these challenges. We think this paper could be a good source for team members as well as leaders who contribute to virtual teams and are making these teams become competences for a successful organization.

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