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Success Strategies for Virtual Teams

By Glenn Parker

When I wrote *Team Players and Teamwork* we were only beginning to see the emergence of teamwork as an important business strategy. Since then quality circles, self-directed teams, cross-functional teams, total quality management and reengineering have all promoted team-based work.

Now virtual teams have moved to the fore as the hottest business strategy.

Management guru Tom Peters, has pointed out that an important organizational model for the future is the movie production crew—a group of people who come together for a brief period of time, work in an intensely collaborative environment, and then deliver a product or service that is the result of their combined efforts.

The successful crewmembers are able to quickly and easily focus on the goal, share their unique expertise, build relationships with diverse teammates and deliver the goods on schedule.

That's difficult enough when the "crew" is located together at one site, but when they are scattered across the country or the globe, there are special challenges.

Although technology makes international virtual "crews" possible, the successful teams and team players still will be those that can create a climate of trust, foster effective communication and make decisions that are viable world-wide.

Virtual teams, since they are not co-located, have few opportunities for the face-to-face meetings and informal communications that are integral to conventional, one-site teams. As a result, certain factors are critical to their success:

1. Goals. The team's goals and project plan must be a unifying force that incorporates the organization's strategy, the objectives of the various disciplines on the team and the needs of team members. Important with any team, it is even more critical when the team is virtual.

2. Stakeholder relationships. The team must have the complete support of the key stakeholders, es-

pecially the discipline leaders or department heads that are providing the team's resources.

3. Communications. The team must master and effectively employ all the available communications technologies. Groupware, bridge numbers, and intranets all help virtual teams perform smoothly.

4. Internal team dynamics. The team's culture must be consistent with, and its members must be competent to work in, a virtual work environment.

It's critical to develop norms for communicating and making decisions in a virtual world that are based on the team member's unique situations, backgrounds, experience,

and work assignments. As with any team, it's important to contract for start-up and on-going data collection and feedback in both live and electronic formats.

Consulting with virtual teams brings some unique challenges. The challenges come from the distance between the players, of course, from the kinds of tasks these teams are asked to undertake, and from the kinds of pressures on most workers today, especially those whose skills are needed on virtual teams. As the team's consultant, coach or external facilitator, you'll have more success if you:

Get wired. You've got to be "connected." Your computer system and software must be state-of-the-art so you can facilitate on-line communication and collaboration. And you must be competent to use the latest technologies.

Recently we've seen teams creating and sustaining their own web sites on the organization's intranet. Team members can participate in on-line discussions as well as post team minutes, reports and helpful articles.

Focus, focus, focus. It's essential that the team have clear goals or outcomes . . . established at the first meeting. Then continually refocus team members on their "charge." It's easy for a virtual team to lose its sense of direction when members have other jobs, live in different countries, work at different sites and operate in different time zones.



Virtual Teams, continued

Other ways to keep the focus strong include reminding stakeholders of the team's task, the importance of active participation by their folks, and continually revisiting the team's charter with team members.

Skip the touchy-feely stuff. Pack away your favorite ice-breaker and style survey. You will have few opportunities to use a "survival" game or MBTI® (Myers Briggs Type Indicator). When the team does have an in-person meeting, use traditional team-building exercises judiciously.

This is precious (and expensive) time.

Therefore, challenge yourself to come up with "quick hits" that build

group cohesion. In addition, you may want to encourage a round of "check ins" periodically, allowing each team member to briefly describe what's going on for them outside of the team, so each can develop a sense of the others as whole people.

Network. Facilitate or directly manage relationships with the key champions and supporters of the team. You cannot let team members get pulled in other directions. You may want to include various key stakeholders in meetings, or send them summaries of the team's minutes. Team members should present summaries to sponsors and other stakeholders periodically and, wherever possible, chat up the team's work with colleagues in informal conversations.


Push for face-to-face meetings. Even the most virtual teams need to meet in person at least once a year. Argue for a kick-off meeting to set goals, clarify roles and develop norms followed by an annual face-to-face meeting. There is value in putting a face together with voice and text. At those meetings, minimize status up-

dates and focus instead on issues that are best addressed by real-time, in person interaction such as customer problems, new business opportunities and the team's goals.

The people who succeed in the 21st century will be those who get high marks in "works and plays well with others." The successful organizations of the future will be customer-focused, team-based entities that can function effectively in a wired world.

Collaboration may always require some face-to-face interaction where basic interpersonal skills take center stage. The successful teams and team players of the future must learn which actions are appropriate with the impersonal, unforgiving nature of electronic communication.

Our view of what it means to be a *team player* is changing. In the past, a team player was often described as a "good soldier," someone willing to go along to get along. Going forward, a team player will be a more complex person—adaptive, creative, visionary, supportive, candid and electronically savvy.

The high performing organizations of the 21st century will place great value on team players. With change as the only constant and globalization as a given, the successful people and organizations will be the ones who can adjust quickly and work effectively in a virtual world. 

Glenn Parker is a team building consultant based in New Jersey, and president of Glenn M. Parker Associate. Glenn is the author of the best-selling book, Cross-Functional Teams: Working With Allies, Enemies and Other Strangers (Jossey-Bass 888.378.2537). Glenn can be reached at 609.333.0203 or glenn@glennparker.com.

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