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Strategies for building effective virtual teams: Trust is key

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Abstract   The impressive growth in web-mediated organizational relationships has created an escalating interest in how to manage virtual teams successfully. As organizations increasingly expect their managers to lead employees in these online groupings, it becomes imperative to identify and train them in the skills to do this effectively. The purpose of this article is to organize and present strategies that organizations have found successful in helping their managers lead virtual teams. While all successful managers must ensure that they have provided the basic organizational support for their employees, especially effective leaders also ensure they build trustworthy relationships. Thus, we emphasize how each strategy contributes to building and sustaining a climate of trust in virtual teams.
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1. Introduction

Fred has just been assigned to lead a team responsible for installing new credit card system software for a large bank in the Republic of Colombia. While this sounds like a normal leadership transition seen in any organization, this particular circumstance is different. The team of programmers and installers does not reside in any single location, but consists of individuals located around the world. Instead of bringing team members together in a conference room to introduce their new manager, it is up to Fred to contact and build relationships with each member of his new team. Although management scholars have created a large body of knowledge on how to manage teams that are physically present in a single location, there is far less understanding of how leaders can manage teams effectively that work together virtually, using computer-based communication technology. It is a far different challenge to lead

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teams whose members are physically co-located than it is to lead a team comprised of people spread out all over the world—or even over the same building—who seldom, if ever, see each other.

Although virtual teams have existed since early history when empires sent their emissaries to rule distant lands, the impressive growth in web-mediated organizational relationships has created an added interest in how to manage virtual teams successfully. As organizations increasingly expect their managers to lead employees in these online groupings, it becomes imperative to identify and train employees in the skills to do this effectively. The purpose of this article is to organize and present strategies that have been found successful by organizations seeking to help their managers lead virtual teams. While all successful managers have to ensure that they have provided the basic organizational support for their employees, the especially effective leaders also ensure they build trustworthy relationships. Thus, we emphasize how each of the strategies contributes to building and sustaining a climate of trust in the team.

We organize the strategies into three inter-related categories: organization, leader, and team. While these are obviously interrelated and difficult to separate, there are specific cues in each category that, if properly presented, contribute to the success of an organization's virtual teams. Cues in each of these categories can aid in the development of trust at two levels (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998): initial team creation (swift trust) and continuing team performance (lasting trust).

2. Virtual teams

Virtual teams are groups of two or more geographically and/or organizationally dispersed people who are coordinated primarily through a combination of telecommunications and communication technologies to accomplish a common and valued goal (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). While initial discussions of how to manage virtual teams focused on the differences between face-to-face and virtual teams, current writers place teams along a continuum from completely virtual to completely face-to-face (e.g., Fiol & O'Connor, 2005).

Virtual teams have grown in use as organizations have employed increasingly sophisticated technology to solve two key problems: (1) how to assemble an optimal array of human resources to solve problems that cross traditional organizational design clusters, and (2) how to assemble teams that can address location-specific needs. In the first instance, organizations find that while they may have the human capabilities to address problems or take on tasks, these people are not co-located in one place, one building, or even in one organizational unit; they are found across the globe in a variety of organizational as well as physical locations (Kirkman, Gibson, & Kim, 2012). Thus, the only way to benefit from collective capabilities is to form a virtual team that can integrate and coordinate knowledge, skills, and abilities to accomplish a task, often a time-limited project. An example of a virtual, cross-functional team would be a localized project group responsible for drilling for oil in the North Sea that needs technical assistance from teams drilling in other distant locations, as well as knowledge available from engineering experts located at the organization's home base.

The second instance is when organizations find it desirable to have employees physically located where they have no permanent presence. To address local market concerns while utilizing organization-wide resources and expertise, organizations might combine teams physically located at a remote or distant location with temporary local hires and/or organizational members scattered across the globe (Verburg, Bosch-Sijtsema, & Vartiainen, 2013). This type of virtual team allows organizations to minimize home country employee travel costs, access expertise across the world, and maximize input from local employees on key project factors such as labor for routine tasks or local customs and practices that can influence the success of a project.

An example of this type of team would be a group—like the one Fred manages, as previously described—that is sent to a distant location to physically install software in a customer's operating system and debug any problems. These teams consist of home-based employees on short-term assignments (even though they could last for a year or more) that are supplemented by local employees and perhaps access to part-time programming experts located in another country or company. These teams operate virtually in the sense that they are not able to benefit from face-to-face communication with their parent company or even other distantly located partners. Complicating the management and effectiveness of these teams is the common situation that some or even all of the team members are not assigned full-time to a particular project team, but instead have multiple projects reporting to several different managers (Cummings & Haas, 2012; Verburg et al., 2013).

Virtual teams depend on having appropriate communication technology to connect and support the members in ways that develop trust. Organizations show that they support the team and its mission