

Chapter VI

Fostering Creativity in Global Virtual Teams: Conversations with Team Leaders

Margaret Oertig

University of Applied Sciences of Northwest Switzerland, Switzerland

Thomas Buergi

University of Applied Sciences of Northwest Switzerland, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents insights from conversations with global team leaders on how to foster creativity in global virtual project teams in the field of product development. It shows how the leaders pay attention to team formation and managing the group dynamics in order to create a climate in which creativity will flourish. They then harness creativity by balancing the roles of motivating their team members in order to encourage fresh thinking and “putting on the brakes” where necessary in order to create something both new and viable. In particular, risk-averse team members are encouraged to be matter-of-fact about risk, making risk evaluation an intrinsic part of idea generation.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we consider the conditions and practices which impact on the creative performance of virtual teams in the field of product development. We present the perspectives of seven experienced team leaders at ABC, a multinational blue chip company with headquarters in Switzerland. These insights emerged from a series of interviews

conducted during a qualitative study investigating the challenges arising from managing virtual project teams. ABC is a pseudonym, referring to a knowledge based technology intensive industry with a long development cycle and a high level of risk and costs during the research process. The stated goal of the project management division of ABC is “to develop innovative products with strongly perceived differentiation and optimal

value, according to global plans, in the shortest time possible, and at adequate cost.” Basadur’s (2004) description of effective organizations would apply to this organization, where adaptability entails “*deliberate discontent—discovering new problems to solve, finding new things to do and adapting new technologies and methods before anyone else*” (p. 104).

Working in geographically distributed project teams within a matrix organisation is the norm at ABC. At any given time there are 50-80 product development projects underway, each with a project leader, a project manager and a core of five to eight project team representatives from various functional areas, for example, research, technical, development, and marketing functions—the key functions are subdivided into more detailed roles which are not specifically named here, in order to protect the anonymity of the company. A project typically lasts three to five years, although some continue after a product is on the market. In addition to the core team, up to 20 others can join the team permanently or temporarily at various stages over this period to advise on specific issues. Project teams experience significant time pressure during product development. Line functions provide the staff and budget and have authority on the aspects of the project related to their functional expertise. Many of the core project team representatives also lead a subteam in their own field or function, and these are also geographically distributed.

The project leader and project manager are located in Switzerland or the USA, and tend not to be based in the same location. The secretary of the company’s Innovation Board (which makes the strategic decisions as to which projects to prioritise in the company’s portfolio) described the differentiation of their roles as follows:

The difference is that the project leader leads the team, representing the team and the project to top management and is responsible for the value of the project and the project strategy. The project

manager is his or her assistant and responsible for all logistics, operational issues, doing the agendas, writing the minutes, feeding the project planning system, checking the budget, resources, and so on. So the project manager is like the chief operating officer (COO) of a project, while the project leader is the CEO of the project, the strategic lead.

As CEOs of their project, the project leaders have to be highly qualified and have extensive experience leading virtual project teams in a global matrix organization. The project leader job description, made available to us, indicates that they are required to have a PhD or an MBA and 5 years of cross-functional leadership experience. It also explicitly states the expectation that they will be creative. They are described as thought leaders who are expected to push themselves and others to see new ways of achieving results. They are required to create systems and processes to exploit the organization’s competitive advantages. They should have the expertise to facilitate and optimize the contribution of team members as individuals and as members of a cohesive team. Finally, they are expected to create new approaches by considering input, concepts, and experiences from across the organization. This chapter will illustrate how they go about fulfilling some of these expectations.

Our research originally had two aims. The first was to discover what the project leadership of ABC perceived as the main challenges arising from managing international teams working in geographically distributed locations, and secondly, how they managed these challenges. The research was qualitative and exploratory, taking the form of inductive thematic analysis. One-hour interviews were conducted face-to-face in the interviewees’ offices in Switzerland and the USA, with six project leaders, six project managers and two ex-project leaders (who have now been promoted to be product area heads). Background interviews were also conducted with three

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