Chapter 5
Guidelines for Working Collaboratively in Virtual Teams

Shelley Stewart
University of South Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

As virtual teams continue to become more prevalent, educational administrators, faculty, and other members of online communities must discover and employ guidelines for effectively collaborating in online contexts. Applying the same traditional team strategies to those working in dispersed groups of people may hinder communication and prevent optimal results. In today's world, teams need to execute and learn at the same time. It is time to re-define what constitutes a (virtual) team and consider new avenues for cooperating in an increasingly diverse, global, and continuously "plugged-in" society. A set of practical steps for why and how virtual teams can collaborate in digital environments is presented. Tips for implementing the steps are provided. An analysis of technological tools available for facilitating online team collaboration is also shared.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century online educational contexts are inherently diverse, composed of students, instructors and administrators with various career goals, experiences and expertise, technical or otherwise. This being the case, organizational leaders must identify differences among the University's members and strategically plan for adequate, efficient communication in various formats facilitating collaboration among all members of the institution. This chapter will aid all stakeholders by presenting practical processes and tips for working collaboratively in virtual groups.

This chapter will provide guidelines that educational leaders, faculty, and students can follow to improve communication, manage conflict and work together productively in virtual settings, leveraging technical tools that are free, accessible and easy to use.

The aim is to advance communication and collaboration in online spaces by focusing on the ways group members can cooperate, fostering personal and professional growth for all.

BACKGROUND

Seventy percent of people globally work remotely at least once a week (IWG, 2018). Within the United States, whereas 20 percent of employees worked one (1) or more days per week virtually in 1996, by 2016, 60 percent of employees had the option to work one (1) or more days a week from home or other off-site location. More than 60 percent of organizations now offer telecommuting benefits, an increase of 14% as compared to 2012 (Society of Human Resource Management, SHRM 2016). Working productively in teams has been and will continue to be critical in many professions, including educational technology contexts.

Global virtual teams are becoming the new normal as people and projects continue to expand across borders, made possible by technological advances. Virtual teams present advantages such as the opportunity to capture multiple perspectives, harnessing top talent regardless of location and accelerating innovation while constructing new knowledge (Derven, 2016). Virtual teams are those made up of people in different physical locations (Ferrazzi, 2014). Virtual teams are also variously defined as geographically dispersed, electronically dependent, dynamic, or comprising diverse members working remotely (Gibbs & Gibson, 2006; Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005).

Virtual teams often operate apart from, around or in parallel to a more formal organization. Therefore, it is important to define and agree upon shared governance, decision frameworks and team protocols. Determining guidelines for the team, roles, responsibilities, sharing, access and storage of information, as well as technology selection is essential. Each virtual team will have its own unique culture. Setting guidelines for how, when and why the team operates helps form team cohesion and can accelerate progress (Derven, 2016).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Issues, Controversies, Problems

As (future) professionals, there is no doubt we will need to cooperate in a variety of groups and teams. It can be a positive, productive experience and/or result in conflict or inefficiencies. Despite the outcomes, the need for group collaboration will continue. "Two trends that are increasingly common in today's team-based settings include working on multiple teams simultaneously and communicating virtually" (Maynard, Mathieu, Rapp, & Gilson, 2012, p. 343).

A positive, productive experience may result from the variety of perspectives a team can tap into to innovate. Team members also bring unique skills and experiences to share and build upon. In addition, team participants that collaborate effectively create a synergy that can inspire future projects or other groups. On the other hand, one of the main problems with working in virtual groups is lack of communication. When the group has not formerly agreed as to when and how they will communicate it is likely someone will get left out or opts out of communication on their own accord. Another issue is roles and responsibilities. It is important to build in accountability measures to ensure contributions are balanced and add to the value of the team's project. Finally, "rules of engagement" are needed. If team members do not treat each other equitably or simply fail to engage, the team and its projects are in jeopardy.

Nevertheless, due to the increase in virtual communication technologies and the social dynamics of new generations of professionals, recommended guidelines for collaborating in virtual groups are

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